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November 19, 1889.

No. 643.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXV.

HAPPY HARRY'S BIG FIND



THE NEXT INSTANT HAPPY HARRY LAY STUNNED AND BLEEDING ON THE ROCKY TRAIL,
WHILE HIS HORSE SPED ON WITHOUT HIM.

OR,

The Beautiful Jezebel's Last Stake.

A STORY OF MONTANA.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "OKLAHOMA HI," "LARIAT LIL,"
"OLD WEASEL-TOP," "SANDY ANDY,"
"THE JOLLY PARDS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FORGIVE ME!

Crash! boom! roar!

As if the very canopy of heaven had cracked asunder and fallen in ruins upon the shuddering earth, the detonating thunder filled the world with uproar.

Crag and canyon reverberated the sound, till the very mountains rocked to their foundation-stones; while the hissing flare of the lightning lit up a scene of wildest confusion.

Montana

Down the canyon rushed the storm-wind, with the fury that made the myth-makers of old believe it a veritable demon. How it wrestled with the trees, twisting their stout trunks as an athlete bends the body of his antagonist. How it lashed the bald faces of the rocks with its scourge of swashing rain.

But for us the mighty throes of nature reach their climax of terror only when a human waif is made their sport.

In a mountain hut sat a man on a rude stool, with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting in his hands, staring gloomily into the blackened fire-place, as if waiting to witness the last flicker of embers, now quickened into renewed life by an eddy of wind down the chimney, and now dying away into white-ashed extinction.

He was not a bad-looking fellow, as miners go, yet evidently a man of strong emotions, and so, open to desperate deeds, if goaded to madness.

His hair and beard, matted with neglect, were jet-black, as were his eyes, now clouded with somber dejection.

"Sam Bropey!" he muttered, calling himself by name. "A dog-gone fool!"

He ground his teeth and frowned blackly with rage.

"Why don't I go fur him, or her, or both of 'em?" he cried, starting up and pacing the room. "Because I'm a blasted coward!"

"She played me fur a gudgeon, an' then flung me back into the drink!" he went on, lashing himself to fury with the scorpion-tongued scourge of humiliation.

"I'd orter killed her then an' thar. How I hate the honey-tongued witch!"

As if he could endure inaction no longer, he rushed out into the storm, scorning its wildest fury.

What to his sturdy frame was the onslaught of the tempest? In fighting the wind he could vent the pent passions that ran riot within him; the pelting rain only cooled the fever in his veins.

Yet it was a night when only such a madman would have needlessly exposed himself to the discomforts, to the perils, of that way amid pitfalls.

Once he was nearly blown over a cliff. Again he narrowly escaped a falling limb torn from the parent stem, and hurled like a war-club at the man who dared to intrude on this battle-ground of the giants.

He only bared his head, and let the rain beat upon it. He gave his face to the whip-lash of the storm.

As if to punish his defiance, the heavens opened, and a tongue of fire shot zigzag to the rock on which he stood, splintering the face of the cliff, yet leaving him scathless, as if he bore a charmed life.

In the midst of the shock, which left him half stunned, he was dimly conscious of a cry which thrilled through him by reason of its high pitch.

While he was recovering, he heard the unmistakable clatter of a horse's hoofs, and knew that the animal was running away, terrified by the lightning.

A moment later he witnessed a spectacle which filled him with conflicting emotions.

Down the canyon came a flying horse, his head tossed wild, his nostrils dilated, his eyes rolling.

Clinging to his back was a woman, as her fluttering garments indicated.

She had evidently lost control of the animal, and was in momentary terror of being hurled to death by a misstep of her reckless charger.

By the flare of the lightning the man and woman recognized each other.

"Now, by all the furies!" he ejaculated.

"Sam! Sam! Save me!" cried she.

"May I never see to-morrow's sun if I do!" he muttered. "Go to the hell you leave behind you, wherever you find a fool to believe in your lying smile!"

But another blaze of lightning showed him her face, agonized with appealing terror.

It was a beautiful face, though her hair, torn down by the wind, hung in dripping strings.

Her olive cheeks, her lips, rich, warm, pulpy when her passionate nature was weaving its spells, were now cold and bloodless; but terror could not rob them of their delicate contour.

Her eyes, whose melting tenderness had made fools of more men than Sam Bropey, were beautiful now in another way.

Her petite figure—it was impossible for it to assume any but graceful lines.

The man looked at her. He heard her cry again:

"Sam! oh, Sam, I was coming to you!"

And the dogged hatred was torn out of his

heart and flung away in the darkness, like the casting out of a devil.

With a great heart-throb he sprung before the racing horse, and cried:

"Jump!"

With a sob of relief, the woman complied with implicit confidence.

She flung herself from the saddle with outstretched arms, and he caught her.

The horse, frightened, sheered outward, lost his footing, and plunged headlong to his death by horrible mutilation on the jagged rocks below.

The man, in the pride of his strength, bore up against the shock.

But, human muscles could not endure it; and, clinging to his burden, he rolled on the ground, almost over the verge of that awful precipice.

When he rose, the woman was unconscious.

Whether she had fainted from terror, or had been stunned by her fall, he could not tell.

Instead of lifting her, he left her lying on the rock, while he stood over her, looking down.

The momentary thrill of compassion had passed with her sore exigency.

She was safe. She had no further need of him. His old suspicion and hatred returned.

"A blasted fool!" he repeated. "Why didn't I let her go? She'd 'a' been down thar now, out o' reach o' harmin' any man."

"I'd hate to see her chawed up, though," he reflected, as a play of lightning revealed her to his gaze again. "It 'ud be a blasted shame to sp'ile such a piece o' work."

The spell of her beauty was upon him, in spite of all he could do to banish it.

"I reckon I'll pull out o' this. I don't want nothin' o' her, an' she don't want nothin' o' me," he declared.

And like a coward, dreading the power of her quivering lips and pleading eyes, he turned his back upon her as she lay unconscious, and fled the spot.

Back to his hut he rushed, slamming to the door, and dropping the bar into its slots.

Did he believe that such a barricade could stand against her?

He stood in the middle of the room, listening with bated breath, as a man might who had fled a ghost, and was in momentary dread of its following him.

"If she would only die, it wouldn't be my fault," he muttered. "She has no claim on me. Curse her! it's a grace that I didn't fling her over the rocks while I held her."

Minutes passed, dragging like hours to his strained imagination.

"What's she wantin' hyar?" he asked himself. "She'd better stay with the snoozer she took up with. He's gone back on her, I reckon, caught her at some o' her tricks, like's not, an' took a stick to her, to ease his conscience. She'll fall back on me, will she? I reckon not! Let her starve, an' rot, an' be hanged to her!"

Nevertheless, when he heard staggering footsteps, the fluff of her wet garments as she sunk down on the doorstep, the feeble beating of her hands against the door, and her voice raised in pleading, he stopped his ears with his fingers in despair that would have been ludicrous but that it was all in such terrible earnest.

It was of no use. In a moment he was listening with his heart in his ears.

"Sam!" she wailed, "open the door, and let me in. I have nowhere else to go but to you. I have not a friend or a well-wisher in all the world. And, oh, I so need friends! One is enough, if only it is you. With everybody else against me, I was sure of your love, and came straight to you."

"You can't come in hyar!" he growled, through the door. "Take my hoss, ef it'll be any use to ye; but don't let me never set eyes on you ag'in."

"You'll let me in, Sam. I have nowhere else to go. Oh, I am so cold, and wet, and miserable!"

That and heart-broken sobs were her only plea.

The man struggled, but lost the battle.

"You kin take the inside, an' I'll take the outside!" was his desperate compromise.

And he flung open the door, and strode past her, fairly stepping over her crouching body.

"I can't get up, Sam," she said. "Something is the matter with me. God knows there is reason for it! I believe I am going to be ill. I never was so weak before."

"You'll manage to git in when you're tired o' layin' thar," muttered Sam, lingering, however, with indecision.

"I don't complain at your treatment," she answered, submissively. "I don't deserve any

better welcome, I know. But even if I should drag myself across the threshold, I should want you to carry me in. I want to feel that you have forgiven me. I made up my mind, if I was to die, it should be here."

She laid her head down on the threshold, as if she had come to die at his feet, and make no complaint.

Grinding his teeth, the man quickly bent over her, lifted her in his arms, and bore her into the house.

She twined her arms about his neck; and as he was about to lay her in his bunk, she said:

"No! I am not going to let you go. Sit down, with me in your lap. I have come to be forgiven, and taken back; and I know that you will forgive me, and take me back once for all, when you learn what has happened. We are never going to be parted again, Sam."

The woman spoke with conviction.

The man, such a slave was he to his passion, clasped her to his breast with sudden spasmodic energy, at the assurance that she was to be his henceforth forever.

She knew then that her end was secured.

He sat down as she directed.

Then she put her cold lips to his, and he felt them grow warm with the clinging pressure.

CHAPTER II.

GIVE ME REVENGE!

THE room in which this strange pair sat was in utter darkness, save when illuminated to daylight brilliancy by the lightning.

When Sam had caught her from her horse, the woman was enveloped in a heavy cloak.

Assured of her position in his arms, she now threw this cloak back, and clasped him again without obstruction.

In the darkness Sam felt that her arms were bare; and the flare of the lightning revealed that she was in fanciful attire, cut low in the neck and short in the skirt, the whole being evidently devised to set off her beauty to the greatest advantage.

All rumpled and wet as it was, it showed the exquisite taste of the woman who had designed it, and more—that no disadvantage could rob her beauty of its positive charm.

Another woman in her condition might with reason have pronounced herself "a fright." This one looked like a water nymph.

But instead of being charmed by the dress, Sam frowned at it, and made a passionate movement as if to extrude her from his arms.

"No! no!" she protested, only clinging the closer. "Don't bother about that, Sam. The moment I have others to replace them, these rags will come off. They have brought me nothing but wretchedness; but I shall wear what you pay for with delight. It won't cost you much. You know you have often said that calico looks better on me than silk on any one else. It will be yours, and that will make it better than silk to me."

"The old folly has been crushed out of me, Sam. I'm going in now for simple happiness. You know that money won't buy that. It has to come of a free gift that costs the giver nothing, but makes him the richer for giving."

"You're at your old trick," growled Bropey. "I never could chin ag'in' you. Hain't you made a fool o' me to your satisfaction yet?"

"I made a fool of myself, Sam—the biggest fool that ever threw her happiness away for such trash as this! I threw away Helen Bropey, to get back Flash the Fire-fly!"

"An' that ugly devil, Purty Pete, in the bargain!" growled Bropey, grinding his teeth, and once more prompted to force her from his arms.

Under the lash of jealousy, he even rose to his feet, striving to tear her clinging arms from his neck.

"Wait, Sam!" she pleaded. "Do you think even that of me? Do you imagine that I ever really meant to give him your place?"

"Money'll do anythin'!" snarled Bropey.

"But not that! I played him for what I could get out of him, and fed him on expectations that even such a stupid oaf as he ought to have seen I never meant to realize. How could he—above all, how could you—imagine that I could give myself to such a monster?"

"Is that true? You are lying to me!"

"Oh, Sam! is it necessary to even tell you such a thing?"

"Swear it! On your soul swear it!"

She slipped down upon her knees, and in the next blaze of lightning held one hand on her heart and the other upstretched toward heaven.

"By all that I hold sacred I do swear that you

cause for jealousy of Pretty Pete. He, monster, has never so much as kissed my hand. Do you imagine that I could let him even touch me without a shudder?"

"Oh, Nelly!" cried the man, bending over her now with the first touch of real tenderness. "You ain't foolin' me? You know I'm so easy fooled when you set out to do it!"

Nothing could be more abject than such an appeal from a man of so powerful proportions.

With a throb of bitterness in her secret heart, the woman thought to herself:

"He wouldn't do it!"

Whoever it was to whom she thus alluded, and with whom she compared the man before her to his disadvantage, nothing of it all appeared in her face.

Instead, she sprung upward, casting herself on Sam Bropey's breast.

"You foolish boy!" she chided him, smiling and kissing him with a playfulness that would have imposed on a far shrewder man, and one less abjectly her slave.

With a great cry of passionate longing he caught her in an embrace that well-nigh squeezed the breath out of her body.

And while he devoured her with kisses, she felt his hot tears rain on her face.

"Take the heart out o' my body!" he exclaimed. "But if you ever go back on me ag'in, I'll cut you into inch pieces, an' then I'll blow myself into shreds fitten to bait fish-hooks, with a keg o' giant powder!"

"You'll have no use for giant powder, except for blasting, yet awhile," she assured him. "But you'll have to burn powder for me, nevertheless."

"What do you mean?"

"That I don't come to you as a free gift, even in my wretched plight."

"I'll give all I've got for you. But what's wantin'?"

"Give me revenge!"

Never in all his wild life had Sam Bropey heard so much venom put into three words.

The woman showed that she could hate far more intensely than he, with his weak blustering.

"Revenge!" he repeated.

"Revenge!" she cried, fairly grinding the word between her teeth.

"Who has injured you? Show me the man, an' he's dead even before I git my paws on him!"

"Let me tell you what has happened—to bind us together forever, you remember."

"Did he remember? Would he ever forget?"

Once more he nearly suffocated her.

"Wait! wait! Oh, Sam!" she gasped.

"My darling! I'll never hurt you, only when my love fur you carries me away!"

He was at her feet, with his arms about her waist, looking up into her face with adoration.

She stroked his hair, and bending, kissed him on the forehead.

"Get up," she bade him. "Sit down, and give me my old place on your lap. I have got something to tell you that may make you as keen to run away from me as you were a few minutes ago. Then I shall hang on to you again; and I want to have a good hold."

Her jesting tone made him laugh.

"I run away!" he cried. "I never meant it—you know that!"

There was more than mere lover's flattery in his declaration. He now felt that he had not really meant to hold out against her, no matter how she came back to him.

Infatuation led him to betray the extent of his infatuation.

"Look at my hands," said the Firefly—for we may as well give her the name by which she was best known in those mountain wilds—Flash, the Firefly.

"I shall never git tired o' lookin' at 'em!"

"But wait till you discover what is on them, before you try to kiss them."

"It don't make any difference to me."

"Not if it's blood?"

"Blood! Have you been hurt, an' I not know it? Thar ain't any blood on your hands. Wait till the next flash."

"Not my own blood," said Flash, with a return of her savage mood.

"Who's else, then? Not Purty Pete's? Have you an' him had a row? What! you don't tell me! Have you finished him off, Nell? Is that it! Blow me ef—"

"Don't congratulate yourself on that score. Pretty Pete may have passed out by this time, but not with my help."

Sam's face fell.

"But why? How?" he demanded.

"Let me make my announcement first. I

will keep nothing back from you. I have just killed somebody; and the Vigilantes are probably on my trail at this very minute."

"The Vigilantes?"

"Led by Harry Hammond."

"Happy Harry?"

"Yes."

"What has he to do with it? He don't tie up at Hicks's Hurrah."

"It is his pard I killed."

"His pard? What for?"

"Let us settle one point at a time. What difference will it make to you if they prove me a murderer? I never killed anybody before."

A shudder ran through the girl. It was instantly followed, however, by a glitter of the eyes, which proved that she was as far from repentance as her off-hand way of telling of her crime indicated.

The man looked at her with a new seriousness in his face.

"I wish't you'd let out the job to me," he answered, slowly. "Such things don't matter much with men; but women oughtn't to mix or meddle with 'em."

"Then this is between us—"

She got no further.

He threw his arms about her as if afraid of losing her.

"It is, as you said, a tie to clinch us together. I'm so glad to git you that I'll take you an' no questions asked, even if you only stick to me for protection."

"Then you will protect me?"

"From anythin' that Hicks's Hurrah kin send this way. I've got provisions that'll stand a longer siege than they're likely to worry through, fur Happy Harry's pard, or anybody else's; an' you know that I kin stand off an army if it comes to takin' this place by storm."

"Well, then, to my story. You know how Hicks's Hurrah got its name."

"I never see the odd Dick myself; but I've hyeared tell how he grubbed away by himself on starvation wages till one day the boys hyeared him burrahin' like a lunatic; an' how he stood 'em off at the muzzle o' the revolver when they run up to see if he'd made a find at last."

"Did you ever hear what became of Hicks?"

The abrupt fall of the man's countenance showed what it was she was probing.

"I hyeared some talk about it," he answered.

"But when Purty Pete was up fur discussion, I kin purty generally find somethin' more agreeable to take up my attention."

"Well," persisted Flash the Fire-fly, as if moved by some freak of feminine perversity, "everybody believed that Hicks had made a strike, but nobody got a chance to prove it till Pretty Pete put his clutches onto him."

"Which the same he never would have done, ef he had put you after him!" growled Sam, with a return of his jealous hatred.

"That's so," admitted Flash, unconcernedly.

"I roped him in, and Pete clawed him. But, that isn't all. You must have heard how it ended."

"In the lie direct, an' revolvers acrost the gamblin' table."

"And the mysterious disappearance of Hicks, when the lamps, which had been blown out in the fracas, were relighted. What did you make of that? Did you believe that he run away?"

"No, I didn't."

"What then?"

"I lowed as Pete sperited him off,—his carcass, I mean, an' buried it, so's it couldn't be proved as he'd killed him, ef the boys took it in to their heads to be ugly."

"But how could he have spirited him off? Where could he have taken him to? Pete was there when the lights were rekindled."

"I don't know nothin' about it. It wa'n't none o' my funeral."

"Well, I'll tell you. Pretty Pete did spirit him off, and alive, too."

"Alive?"

"He's alive to this day."

"Hicks?"

"Of course. What do you suppose he had stumbled upon, that set him hurrahing so?"

"How should I know?"

"It was a cave, with a dry run in it. Hicks panned the bottom, and found it loaded down with color. Pete found this out—that is to say, I found it out for him; and that fight was a sham, to get a chance to capture him and imprison him in his own cave."

"Pete, as you know, had won Hicks's claim at faro; so all he had to do was to take possession."

"But what did he want of Hicks, after he had got his dust?"

"That's just the point. He didn't get all of his dust, nor anything like it. He knew that

there was a lot more hidden; so he captured him to make him show it up."

"An' has hung on to him ever since?"

"Trying to starve and whip him into divulging the secret of his hidden gold."

"The gold that was to fix you so's you could swell around in Paris!"

"Exactly. Well, Hicks baffled us. He knew that we would not kill him, so long as there was any hope of wearing him out; so he stood everything, till to-day."

"An' what has happened to-day?"

"A woman—his sister, I fancy—came and rescued him."

"An' beat you an' Purty Pete?"

"She got the best of us. We did not suspect her. She was disguised as a man, and was backed by Happy Harry."

"As his pard! Was it her you killed?"

"Yes. She found her brother; but I got away with her, and made my escape."

"An' Purty Pete?"

"I left him in the cave, fighting it out with Happy Harry. I reckon he got the worst of it."

"So that's all?"

"All but my revenge."

"Oh! I thought you got square with the girl. What more do you want?"

"Happy Harry brought her to the camp, for the express purpose of getting even with me for a slight I once put upon him. He has carried his point. All that I have worked for so long was snatched from me in a moment. Now I want his blood!"

"You shall have it; or I'll git my own tapped tryin' to git it fur ye! But first, we'll look out fur your safety. Let the lot of 'em come, and see what they make buckin' ag'in' Sam Bropey."

He arose and put the place in a state of defense.

Flash the Firefly took advantage of his occupation to remove her wet clothing, and go to bed.

He went and looked down upon her as she lay asleep, as quietly as if no stain of crime were upon her.

"They'll never git her away from me," he declared, shaking his fist in the direction whence the Vigilantes must come. "They'll chaw me up in inch pieces first."

But this degree of devotion was not demanded of him. No pursuers presented themselves.

On the following day, at the behest of the woman, Sam went on a reconnoitering expedition, in which he learned that the crime of which she had made confession had not been consummated. Her will had been good enough. She had shot to kill, with a malice the spring of which he did not yet know; but her intended victim had escaped with only a painful, not necessarily dangerous, wound.

"What!" she cried, when she learned that the object of her hatred yet lived. "Everything lost to me, and no one pays for it? Now I doubly demand your promise! You said I should have revenge. Nothing will satisfy me short of the lives of both of these."

"Happy Harry an' his pard—man or woman—shall be yours!"

"We will exact this revenge together. I will fight at your side."

And from that moment Flash the Firefly combined the cooing gentleness of a dove with the deadly malignity of a serpent.

CHAPTER III.

THE PARDS.

IN all its exciting history Hicks's Hurrah had never had such a sensation.

The mystery of the disappearance of the man who had given it its name was solved.

Everybody crowded about what had been Pretty Pete's dance-house, now reclaimed by its rightful owner, who lay within, recovering from the barbarous cruelty that had been practiced upon him to wring from him the secret of his hidden wealth.

"Whv, blast his wicked heart!" cried an individual who was detailing his knowledge, with perhaps a coloring of imagination, for the edification of the gaping crowd, "ef Purty Pete didn't treat him to a dose o' the cat, night an' mornin', every day! He looks like a travelin' sack o' bones, he's that scrawny! You hyear me, gents?—thar ain't a squar' inch o' his hide what ain't lined with the lash, as if he'd been on a gridiron."

A roar of rage showed the resentment with which the crowd received this story of savage barbarity.

"Whar's Purty Pete? Let's have him out o' hyar!"

"We'd orter stretched his neck when we sot out to, when Hicks disappeared."

"It ain't too late now. Let's hang him up to dry, an' fill his hide full o' lead."

"Gents, first ketch yer flea!" cried the first speaker.

"Has Pete got away?"

"You bet! He had a back door handy out o' that cave. When we went in thar with a light, to clean up the blood an' ha'r, Mister Pete he was among the missin'."

The crowd vented its disappointment in a howl of condemnation.

At this point the door of the dance-house, which had been closed to every one not immediately concerned, was opened from within, and a man presented himself to address the crowd.

He was as fine a specimen of young manhood as one need wish to see.

His broad, square shoulders, the erect carriage of his head, the bright intelligence and cheerfulness of his countenance, recommended him to every one at the first glance.

"Happy Harry! Happy Harry!" went up the cry. "Give him a hearin', gents."

"Give him a roof-lifter first. Hip! hip!"

"Hold on, gentlemen!" cried Happy Harry, stretching out his hand in admonition. "Nothin' will please me better than your expression of good will—at another time. But, just now, what we want most is quiet."

"How's the pard?" demanded one of the listeners. "Did the Firefly git away with him?"

"We're comin' out o' this thing better'n we expected," was Harry's assurance. "The Firefly didn't git away with the Jim Dandy, an' don't you forget it!"

In spite of his caution, this intelligence was received with a suppressed yell of delight.

"He's the pearliest leetle cuss what ever stood in two shoes!" cried an admirer of Jim Dandy.

"He's got more spunk'n ary ten men in this hyar camp!" declared another.

"He'll pull through. Don't you furgit it, boys! He was never born to be knocked out by no woman."

"He'll take it kindly if his friends will disperse," said Happy Harry. "An' not to send you away without some mark of his appreciation, he proposes an adjournment to the Last Nugget, whar the barkeeper will set 'em up against his slate for the rest of the evenin'."

If the Jim Dandy's aim was popularity, he could have adopted no surer course than this.

"But, hold on, gents!" interposed one of their number. "What's to be done about this hyar? Ef we're to come back at Purty Pete, we hain't got no time to lose. An' thar's the Firefly. Woman or no woman, she'd orter suffer."

"Nothing is to be done," objected Happy Harry. "We're content with the present state of things. It's Jim Dandy's funeral; and both he and Hicks say the same thing."

"Waal, Hicks is mighty furgivin'. That's all I've got to say."

"Ef Purty Pete had sarved me so, I'd have the hide off his body from head to heels!"

The crowd did not willingly forego its revenge; but Happy Harry at last prevailed with them, and they all went off to the Last Nugget to make a night of it.

Harry returned into the house.

"How is he comin' on?" he asked the doctor in attendance.

"He's asleep," was the reply.

"You're goin' to pull him through, Doc? You're sure of it?"

There was keen anxiety in the eyes that scanned the doctor's face; and Happy Harry's voice never had been more grave.

"Don't you worry," was the assurance. "He's good for many a battle yet."

"I hope he won't have 'em to fight," said Harry.

"With his pluck?" cried the doctor, with a lifting of the brows in surprise. "He'll never get through this wicked world without his share of the rackets."

Happy Harry made no reply, but went into the adjoining room on tiptoe.

It was a very surprising room to find in such a place.

It was fitted up with all the elegant frippery of the boudoir of a lady of wealth—the last thing in the world one would expect to run upon in a wild western mining camp.

Here the Firefly had prepared for her scheme of social conquest, when, rolling in the wealth wrung from poor Hicks, she should burst upon the French metropolis like a meteor of unrivaled splendor.

Here, under the tuition of a Frenchman, M. Carmeaux, she had been practicing the arts and graces required by her new role.

A small upright piano stood against the wall. A guitar with a gay silken cord leaned in a corner. A pair of high-heeled slippers that Cinderella might have envied were just visible under the end of a rich divan. A dress with a princess train hung across the back of a chair, in material and cut the most elegant.

She had learned to sing, to dance, to chatter French, to handle a fan as only a French coquette could hope to do in rivalry of those senioritas who are born to this particular fascination.

No actress was ever trained more carefully, nor had a more enthusiastic instructor.

M. Carmeaux was a genius in his way. In his native Paris he had been a mantua-maker; and what he didn't know about the arts of the artful sex would make a mighty small book!

But the Firefly's ambition was now brought to naught, and another was in possession of her conjuring wand.

In an alcove, shut off from the main apartment by a rich curtain, sliding on gilded rings, stood her bed, in which now lay what had the appearance of a boyish figure, with, however, the badge of early manhood on his shaven chin and upper lip.

If Flash the Firefly had announced openly in Hicks's Hurrah her suspicion that this was a woman in disguise, she would have been unhesitatingly laughed to scorn, and her opinion set down to jealousy.

True, the Jim Dandy was small in stature, and one might admit almost effeminately delicate in every way. But this said, there was absolutely nothing else to cast a doubt upon his being what he claimed to be; while there was abundant proof that he was not only a man in courage and address, but indeed an altogether exceptional one.

Never had there been a more dashing advent into any mining-camp.

Happy Harry had been waylaid and assaulted, and was at the point of capture, if not death, when a stranger leaped into the melee, and with revolvers the triggers of which had been removed so that they might be fired with greater rapidity, turned the tide of battle, scattering such of the assailants as survived to run away.

Charmed with his pluck and skill, Happy Harry had made overtures, which were accepted, to adopt him as his pard on the spot, engaging to aid him in a scheme which had brought him to Hicks's Hurrah.

In the following matching of wits against Pretty Pete, no man could have been more effective than Jim Dandy had proved.

The very name they dubbed him with was in token of his prowess.

By a treacherous shot the Firefly had brought him, as it was at first feared, to death's door.

The surgeon's verdict, however, was more favorable; and now Happy Harry sat down beside his sleeping pard, fixing his eyes upon him with such loving solicitude as men bear each other only when friendship means a sharing of perils where a helping hand may at any moment make the difference of a life.

"There is no need of your losing your rest, Kitty," he said to the girl in attendance on the wounded Dandy. "I'll watch him to-night."

"I wouldn't think of leavin' him, Harry," answered the girl. "What do you know about makin' him comfortable, if he was to wake up? He wants a nurse more than a doctor: I can tell you that."

"Waal, lay down on the divan, thar, an' I'll rouse you if he wakes."

"I'll do that, if you ain't too tired yourself."

"What should make me tired? Go to sleep, girl! A little strain on my nerves don't use me up, as if I was a woman. Now you, with the hysterics an' what-not you've been through to-night, need rest."

And Harry laughed.

Not at all disturbed by his chaff at the weakness of her sex, Kitty fetched a blanket, and curled herself up on the divan, which made a far more luxurious couch than she was used to.

While she slept the dreamless sleep of youth and health, Harry sat motionless, watching his pard, for hours.

There was no indication of daybreak in this strange apartment; for it was within the mouth of the cave against which the house was built.

Here no sound of the outer world penetrated, nor could what went on in here be heard without.

Flash the Firefly had devised it, with a door that muffled all sounds, so that no one would suspect her doings; and it was really for the comfort of Hicks, who occupied an outer room, that

Happy Harry had used Jim's name in displacing the crowd.

But a healthy stomach is a mighty good alarm-clock for the purpose of early rising; and at her accustomed hour the girl, Kitty, awoke.

She received Harry's report that his pard had slept the night through without stirring, with bantering doubt as to his having kept awake to see; and then hastened out to prepare her patient's breakfast.

It appeared that Jim Dandy, too, had had his sleep out, for the slight stir and low voices caused him to move restlessly, and the door had scarcely closed upon his nurse when he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STROKE OF THE COBRA.

AT sight of his pard sitting at his bedside, a startled flush swept to the Jim Dandy's temples, and he drew the coverlet up about his chin with a spasmodic little clutch.

But, not appearing to notice this, Harry's greeting was quite natural and unrestrained.

"Waal, pard! how air you comin' on? You're lookin' peart, as sure's ye live! I'm mighty glad o' that."

Then the Jim Dandy recovered his presence of mind, and extended his hand with all his outward carelessness.

"Hallo, old man!" he exclaimed. "What are you prowling around here for? You don't mean to say you've not gone to bed? It's as dark as a pocket yet, but it must be well on toward morning."

"Oh, don't mind me," answered Harry. "I'm never sleepy. But, how do ye feel, boy? That's the question what agitates the community jest at present."

"Feel!" repeated Jim. "Like a lark for spirits, and like a wolf for hunger! But, where's Kitty? A healthy nurse she is! Don't she think I ever need medicine or grub?"

"You ain't dyin' fur medicine, thank the Lord!" ejaculated Harry, rubbing his hands in delight. "Don't you ever touch the pizen, Jim! That's what makes hospitals an' graveyards—in the East, I mean, o' course. As fur grub, we'll fix you out in that line in no time. Kitty's jest gone fur to snatch that kitchen stove bald-headed. I let her sleep on the divan yonder; an' ef she puts in her time as straight in the hash-foundry, we'll soon have to put you in trainin' to reduce your weight."

"Why, what time is it?" asked Jim.

Harry explained why the sun did not penetrate to the apartment.

"And have you been fool enough to sit there all night?" ejaculated Jim, opening his eyes in apparent surprise.

"The Doc said that how you waked up would tell the story," explained Harry, simply. "So I 'lowed I'd be on hand to see."

"Oh, hang the doctor!" cried the Jim Dandy. "Go to bed, man! I'm all right."

This was said as one man is won't to evade any unusual mark of tenderness on the part of another. But there was a look in Jim's eyes which showed that he was not without appreciation of his pard's solicitude.

"I'll do better'n that," replied Harry. "I'll go an' hurry up your breakfast. You'll have to take what the Doc says, though, fur a spell yet."

"No spoon-virtuals!" the Jim Dandy called after him.

But the moment he was gone all this rollicking air disappeared.

"So!" mused the invalid, "he thinks enough of his pard to lose sleep simply to see how he is likely to come on?"

He said no more aloud, but the fleeting expression of his countenance showed that his breast was a theater of shifting emotions.

Now he flushed vividly, and looked distressed; again he smiled with a far-away look in his eyes; once he murmured something under his breath, so that, even if any one had been present, it would have been unintelligible.

When Kitty appeared, with a tray containing as inviting a breakfast as any invalid need wish, in spite of his previous profession of extreme hunger, Jim did not deign it a second glance, but shouted at once:

"Fasten that door!"

"It's too late," laughed his nurse, complying, however, with his wish.

"How could you do such a thing?" was the reproachful demand.

"How could I help it?" was the plea in extenuation. "Could I tell him that he wasn't to see his pard, and so set him to thinking of what he'd never dream of without being knocked in the head?"

"Oh, Kitty! that comes of having too tender-hearted a pard!"

"You'll not complain of that in the future, I'll go bail!"

"Hush! There never will be a future!"

"I'll bet my head on it!"

"There won't, I say!—and for a very good reason. It will be impossible ever to bury the Jim Dandy!"

"The easiest thing in life," was Kitty's assurance, as she joined in Jim's laugh over his own obsequies. "A man's eyes are made of leather!"

"But, suppose he insists on digging up the body for identification?"

"Well, he'll have you there, for a fact. But I wouldn't let my breakfast get cold worrying over that chance. I fancy, Jim, if he does unearth him, will have little trouble in convincing him that a live sweetheart is better than a dead and gone pard."

"Well," answered Jim, thoughtfully, "I'd do as much as that for my sister, to be sure."

And for some reason or other—what, I do not pretend to say—the two speakers laughed again.

Then Jim proved that he did have an appetite, whatever the future might hold; and Kitty's nursing, or his own youth and health, soon had him on his pins again, only the much-abused Hicks claiming continued attention.

However, if he did not recover as rapidly, it was not by the fault of his nurses. The Jim Dandy was untiring in his devotion; if anything, Kitty was more faithful to him than to Jim; and there was, besides, Happy Harry.

But then he may not have been an acquisition; for he would not let his pard overdo himself in his own state of impaired strength.

"This hyar won't do, Jim," he protested. "I like Hicks, but I like my pard a blame sight better; an' I ain't standin' by an' seein' you wear yourself out on him or any one else, ye onderstand."

"I thought our bargain was for you to do as I say, and not for me to do as you say," objected the Jim Dandy, playfully.

"Thar won't no pardnership stand long on that basis, an' that's a fact," declared Harry, more seriously. "It's got to be give an' take, an' each with his innin's when his turn comes."

"Very well. It's my innings now. When Hicks gets well, you can take your turn at bossing, if you care to. I'll do just as you like."

"Will you?" asked Harry, with a quick, piercing glance.

But he immediately went on in his natural manner:

"Waal, you won't find me much of a boss; an' I ain't bossin' now."

"What do you call it, when you dictate to me how far I may care for a pard of mine before I knew you?"

"A boss looks out fur his own advantage; but I'm lookin' out fur you. I'll take your place, ye onderstand, an' give your pard as good attention as you kin give him yourself. What you want is a free run till you git your nerve back. Ef we keep you shut up hyar, you'll soon be off yer feed, an' then the deuce will be to pay."

"I sha'n't soon be off my feed in this air," laughed Jim Dandy. "But I'll let you have your way, the more readily since I have an idea in my head that I'd like a chance to work up."

"What idee is that?"

"Why, knocking about in search of Hicks, I happened to do a mite of prospecting; and I have a notion to see what there is in it."

"Is it nigh hyar, Jim? Look a' hyar!—what's the reason the thing won't keep till I kin go along with ye? Hicks will be on his feet then, to make the third."

"What's the use of so many? Don't you suppose I can tell color by myself?"

"Maybe you kin. But, to tell you the truth, I don't much like the notion o' your browsin' around by yourself."

"And why not, pray, sir?" demanded Jim, quickly drawing himself up. "Haven't I proved my ability to look out for number one? If either of us, I think it is you that need looking after. How did I find you, my dear sir?"

"In a tight fix, Jim—I don't deny that. An' you did sail in amazin'. If you hadn't, maybe I wouldn't be hyar now. But that's the more reason why you shouldn't run the same resk. With Purty Pete loose, an' naturally on the war-path bigger'n a grizzly b'ar, the woods around this camp might not be a Sunday afternoon promenade fur you."

"I'll look out for Pretty Pete. I should like nothing better than the chance to fetch in his scalp."

The Jim Dandy was between laughter and seriousness. Though he had called off the vendetta, he was far from viewing Hicks's brutal persecutors with complacency; and it is probable that a face-to-face meeting with either of them would cause his natural resentment to get the better of his forgiving disposition.

However, he went away cheerily, with his pick and shovel and pan and a day's rations slung jauntily over his shoulder, waving a merry adieu to his pard and his many other admirers.

That was the last seen of him.

When night came, it did not bring his return.

As the day progressed, Happy Harry had become more and more uneasy, blaming himself for letting his pard go alone at such a time.

To be sure, nothing had been seen or heard of either Pretty Pete or the Firefly since their escape; yet either or both might be lurking about for revenge.

Such people would not easily accept such a defeat.

In vain did the boys argue that Jim had gone prepared to stay over night if necessary.

"You stay whar you be, boys," answered Harry. "Thar ain't no call fur you. But I'm off."

There were a plenty to propose to accompany him when they found that he was determined; but he said no.

"Jim won't want an army huntin' him up, as if he wasn't able to take care of himself. But ef he kicks at me, I'll have to stand it. I'm off anyway."

And he went unattended.

Kitty was left in care of Hicks; and when he asked for his pards, she told him that they had gone out for a little air and exercise, not intimating that they were out together.

He went to sleep, "as quiet as a lamb," she afterward said; but his sleep would have been anything but quiet, if what was going on that night could have visited him in his dreams!

Up to midnight the camp wore its usual air of carousal; and the last inebriate reeled, howling and firing his revolver into the air, to his frowsty bunk.

But the silence between midnight and dawn was broken by the wildest excitement.

One heavy sleeper was roused by thunderous pounding on his door, and the startling summons:

"Rouse out o' hyar, pard! Tophet's broke loose, an' the world's on fire!"

"Who's hyar? What in Cain be you tryin' to git through you? Is that you, Jake?"

"Rouse out, I say! The Jim Dandy's dead, an' Happy Harry's cut all to pieces! Doc Fleetwood found him layin' out in the woods. Gid Becket brung in the news. Everybody's on the keen jump, an' armin' fur blood. Rouse out o' hyar ef you don't want to be left behind."

There was no further information to be got, even if desired. The speaker rushed off to the next shanty, to repeat his summons. Others were engaged at the same work on all sides.

The news spread like wildfire, and from every direction men, some of them but scantily dressed, but all of them armed to the teeth, came running to the open space before what had been first Hicks's shanty, then, much enlarged, Pretty Pete's dance-house, and once more the possession of the restored Hicks.

The usual gasoline lamp was flaring luridly before the house, where an excited crowd was gathered about the door, staring at something fastened against it.

This proved to be a cartridge belt, pinned in place by a bowie-knife thrust through it and deep into the wood by some powerful hand.

Everybody recognized the belt as one worn by the Jim Dandy, and the bowie as the property of Happy Harry.

The belt was blood-stained and pierced by a bullet. The blade of the bowie was bloody to the hilt, which, even bore bloody finger-marks.

Not a line, not a word, explained this ghastly symbol of defiant triumph.

As the sleeper whose rousing we have chronicled came up, he heard Zack Ringold saying:

"Boys, they're both goners! Look a' that belt. It's plugged plumb center! It must 'a' took him in the spine."

Before the new-comer could make any inquiries, some one else shouted:

"Look! look! what's this hyar? Blast my two eyes ef it ain't Hicks!"

"Hicks, or his ghost! Who had the gall to tell him?"

"Stand back!"

It was the command of one who looked like a dead man, and everybody fell away at his word.

CHAPTER V. ENTRAPPED.

JIM DANDY left the camp in a very gay mood.

He was a bird that was fond of being on the wing; and his confinement as invalid, and afterward as nurse, made all the world glow in a new light when he was free to be out in it again.

Truth to tell, he was not much of a prospector.

He was fonder of looking for gold in the sunset than in the bowels of the earth.

If the sober, matter-of-fact miners whom he had left, refusing to allow any of them to accompany him, though more than one had intimated that he would esteem it a rare privilege could he have seen him stop and clap his hands in glee as he peered among the branches of a tree at a scampering coney, they would have thought him a remarkably rattle-headed fellow.

His washing for gold, too, was the furthest possible from serious business.

In the midst of it, his eye was attracted by a pretty stone; and he dropped his pan to examine the pebble.

But between the whiles when he strolled along, with his eyes darting about in every direction, so as not to miss a single wonder in the always-wonderful nature that surrounded him, while he whistled or hummed softly to himself, there were long periods when he sat idly on the bank of some mountain run, tossing pebbles into the water, with a far-away, dreamy look in his eyes.

A smooth stretch of sand invited him to write upon it with a stick; and this is what he wrote:

"Mrs. Harry Hammond."

No sooner was the name traced, however, than, with a swift-coming flush, he swooped down upon it with his pan, and scooped up the "Mrs." with a single pass.

He was about to throw the sand far out into the stream, but on second thought arrested the motion.

"I'll wash it, and if there is gold in it, will take it as an omen of good luck."

With a grimace and a shrug he asked himself: "Good luck for which? It will be hard luck for him!"

And he fell to laughing at some pictures that flitted before his imagination.

But gradually his face sobered, and he washed this painful of sand with far more seriousness than any that had preceded it.

It was with something like superstitious anxiety that he watched the lessening sediment in this pan.

His face lightened up wonderfully when, in the fine black powder that it was finally reduced to, he discovered the glint of particles of gold-dust.

It was not for the intrinsic richness of the yield, however, that he put it carefully into a buckskin bag, declaring, with a sigh of satisfaction:

"There! I'll wear that as a charm till something comes of it."

Having suspended this about his neck with a bit of ribbon, and thrust it into the bosom of his shirt, he addressed himself to his lunch, for which his ramble had given him a keen appetite.

In the midst of this employment he was startled by the sound of a footstep.

In a twinkling he had a brace of revolvers out; and now any miner who had seen him would have been convinced that he was of a very marked business turn when it came to an exchange of shots.

At a little distance he discovered what in the East would have been set down as the most wretched of tramps. In that country the person who presented himself thus unexpectedly would have passed at a glance as an unlucky prospector who was at the end of his "grub-stakes," and well-nigh at the point of starvation.

"Well, mister, what's the good word?" was the Jim Dandy's greeting.

"Pard," answered the fellow, "I've got sich a big hole on the inside o' me that thar's lots o' room fur words, but I don't find but one handy."

"And what's that?"

"Grub!"

"How'd whisky do as a substitute?" asked Jim, quizzically.

"A drop would be a godsend, stranger; but I'd druther have a toothful o' terbacker, ef so be you mought have a mite about yer clo'es."

"Nary plug. But you are welcome to a cigar, if you can make any use of it."

"Give me a mite to eat, ef you have it to

spare, an' I'll git along with the weed afterwards. I'm amazin' hungry, pardner."

As there was nothing suspicious in the appearance or manner of the man, Jim set apart the best of his lunch for him.

"Stow that away, stranger, where no investigating committee can get after it," was his invitation.

And his guest fell to with a ravenousness that made good his profession of hunger.

"Prospecting?" asked Jim.

The stranger paused just long enough to answer:

"You bet!"

"What luck?"

"Look a' this hyar."

And from somewhere among his rags the fellow drew forth a buckskin bag, and dropped it into Jim's hand.

"Well! well! you don't go hungry for the lack of the wherewithal to pay for a good dinner," exclaimed Jim, hefting the bag.

"Thar's more'n me as has been in the same fix in these hyar mountings."

"Were you on your way to Hicks's Hurrah?"

"I was on my way to anywhar whar I could git somethin' fur to fill up this hyar cave in my stumjack! But I don't know nothin' about Hicks's Hurrah. Whar mought that be?"

"Straight down this gulch, within three hours' walk."

"I mought 'a' had three hours' more walk in me, ef I'd been put to it; but you bet your sweet soul it didn't turn my stumjack fur to find a dinner waitin' fur me hyar. An' now, young feller, I'll tell ye what I'll do."

"What will you do? Have the cigar?"

"I'll take the cigar; but you ain't to 'low as I'm always lookin' out fur number one. I've took a notion to you—I have so; an' I'll make you a proposition."

"All right. I'm open to propositions; which, however, isn't saying that I'm likely to accept them. But drive ahead. What's your proposition?"

"You see that thar dust?"

"Of course."

"Waal, thar's a heap more whar that come from."

"Doubtless, if you're willing to starve yourself to death getting at it."

"That ain't necessary. What ye want is supplies, an' then ye're hunk."

"Yes," laughed Jim. "You appeared to be in want of supplies—bad!"

"That's jest it. Suppose a scare-crow like me goes into this hyar camp what you tell about, an' lays in a stock of provender? He'll be spotted quicker'n greased lightnin'; an' a lot o' galoots 'll be doggin' his heels the minute he tries to cut loose."

"Very likely. A fellow of your present appearance would be apt to be looking for an angel before he set out again, unless he was going to something sure."

"That's jest it. It's an angel I'm lookin' fur, but not an angel to put up grub-stakes."

"What kind of an angel is more to your liking?"

"I want a pard what kin go between my diggin's an' neighborin' camps, an' keep me in supplies, without wakenin' suspicion; an' you're jest the galoot fur to do it. You won't go to one place all the while, ye understand; but now hyar, an' ag'in yonder. You've got the tenderfoot look about you; an' the boys'll be more like to 'low as you're blowin' in yer rocks while you're larnin' the tricks o' the trade—gittin' experience."

"What more would I get than experience, if I went into this thing?"

"A heap. To begin with, you don't put nothin' in. I furnish the dust fur to buy with. Then I'll share with you—give you a third."

"You might do that, and yet I not make my salt."

"Before you go into the thing, I'll show you that it'll pan out better'n ary thing you ever was in, in yer life."

"But if I conclude not to go in, I shall have your secret."

"I like the look o' you, young feller; an' I'll trust you not to give me away. Howsomever, I know you'll jump at the chance, on sight."

"It is only fair to tell you that I have a pard who would have to be let into this thing if I went into it."

"So much the better, ef he ain't afraid o' work. But I'd druther have somebody a mite nervier than you."

And the stranger scanned Jim's slight figure without apparent prepossession.

Jim laughed.

"My best hold is on the shoot," he said. "But my pard could get away with you, at anything

you might propose, the best day you ever saw."

"Then I say ag'in, the more the merrier! It's powerful lonesome, grubbin' all alone by yerself, an' that's a fact. Whar's this hyar pard o' yours?"

"In the camp—Hicks's Hurrah."

"Fetch him on. But we'll have to swear him to secrecy. I don't want the hull o' this hyar Rocky Mountings droppin' in on me. I've struck a good thing, an' I want to milk it dry before a lot more come in to the strippin's."

"Meanwhile, if you like, you kin see whether the thing's worth your while."

"Where can I see it?"

"Within five mile o' this hyar spot. I come down from the Yanktown way; an' I didn't 'low as thar was ary camp so nigh."

"Ef you'll take the thing in, we kin strike the bargain on the spot; you kin come back fur grub, an' I'll peg away fur all I'm worth."

Though, as has been said, Jim Dandy had come out with no very serious purpose of prospecting, still he had no more aversion to the "root" than has any one else.

"If I can put Harry up to a good thing," he reflected, "he will be all the readier to take a vacation."

Jim laughed to himself at the part he was playing, and flushed a little too.

However, he concluded to see what the stranger offered.

"I reckon I'll look your claim over," he said, "and if I like it, it's a go. But what might I call you?"

"Barnaby—Betsey Barnaby."

"My handle is Jim Dandy."

"Waal, the feller what give you that, knowed what he was talkin' about. You look a Jim Dandy."

"I'd rather act it."

"I reckon you will ef the pinch comes, by the way you grabbed them thar weepers when I first showed up. I 'lowed you was goin' to bore me before I had a chance to speak."

"One has to be on one's guard in this country."

"That's so, pardner, fur a fact."

So they set out, with seeming satisfaction on the part of Betsey Barnaby, and certainly no suspicion on that of the Jim Dandy.

However, he observed a certain instinctive, or rather habitual, caution. Without really doubting the honest intentions of the stranger, Jim let him keep in front of him, as was quite natural, he having the way to lead.

Barnaby's manner might well have disarmed suspicion, even if at the outset Jim had been wary.

He talked with apparent frankness, in an exultant strain, as was natural to one with a fortune in prospect.

"Look a' hyar, pardner," he said, "this hyar windfall comes in about as handy fur me as fur ary galoot what ever comes into good luck. I've got an ole mother back in Missouri, what's waitin' fur me—as good a woman as ever stood in two shoes. An' thar's a gal what's contracted to have me when she see as I could put a roof over her head. She 'lowed as I wasn't worth my salt, only fur huntin' an' fishin', an' fur knockin' around on trainin' days. But she's got a soft spot in her heart fur me, all the same; an' I know it! But won't her eyes bung out, though, an' won't she show her pretty teeth, when I drive up in my own hoss an' waggin, an' 'low as we'll climb fur that thar parson as soon as she kin git her sunbonnet on? Waal, now, pard, I jest wish't you could see her—I do so!"

In no other way could Betsey Barnaby have so wormed himself into Jim Dandy's confidence. He was not such a bad-looking man, as he rambled on with that happy smile on his face.

"What is her name?" asked Jim, with quick sympathy.

"Jerusha!" answered Barnaby.

Jim smiled, this name was so little suggestive of anything very charming in the way of a sweetheart.

But a lover can soften any name, and Barnaby pronounced this with a lingering affection that went far toward redeeming it.

"I call her Jerry," he went on.

"And she calls you Betsey?" laughed Jim.

"That's a curious interchange. You must be a jolly couple."

"You bet yer sweet life we jest be!" cried Barnaby, highly pleased.

And so the conversation ran on, Barnaby winning upon Jim more and more as they climbed the precipitous way.

Barnaby was as active as a mountain goat, and he easily scaled places that taxed Jim's

agility by requiring a stretch rather longer than his legs were made for.

At such points Barnaby offered his hand, lifting with a strength that left Jim little or no effort.

It was at a place of this kind, when Jim was entirely off his guard, that his guide gave such a tug as not only to lift him up the barrier, but to draw him plump into his arms.

Jim at first thought it an accident, one altogether distasteful to him, yet of no great importance, till suddenly he realized that he was being disarmed, Barnaby possessing himself of both his revolvers while his hands were at his back.

Dropping them when he had drawn them, his arms closed about Jim like the jaws of a steel-trap, and the whole expression of his face changed.

With his heart in his throat, Jim began to struggle when it was all too late.

"No kickin', pard!" said Barnaby, in an altogether new tone of voice. "I've got you! I'm much obliged to you fur walkin' so quietly into my den."

Even then the illusion his plausible manner had created was not at once dispelled.

"Hold on," panted Jim. "Did you think I would betray you? I give you my word—"

"I wouldn't give a rap fur your word, when I've got you yourself, word an' all."

Jim was fighting for his bowie, far from yielding himself a prisoner to this prospector who took such high-handed means, as it appeared, to protect his find.

But the struggle was futile.

He was soon entirely disarmed. Not only so, but his wrists were tied behind his back.

Then Barnaby sat down on a rock, and smilingly gave him this recommendation:

"Holler. Thar may be help some'rs within reach o' your voice."

Jim did not avail himself of this privilege.

Seeing himself "down," he resolved to make the best of the situation.

"I prefer to appeal to your reason," he said, quietly. "You have taken me prisoner to prevent the betrayal of your discovery. I hope to be able to convince you that you have made a mistake, and might better have taken me at my word."

"Pard an' all?" laughed Barnaby. "Didn't your pard have no sisters, nor cousins, nor aunts, what might like to come into this thing?"

"But a partner—such a one as I offered you—would be a good thing for you. You would have company; and you know that two men can work at better advantage than one. You are letting selfishness get the start of reason, when you try to hold on to this all alone."

"I never was much on the chin," answered Barnaby. "But hyar's somebody what kin hold her own ag'in' even you—an' you're a good one at it! Ef you kin convince her, we'll go back to the old proposition."

"Her? Whom?"

And Jim looked about in surprise.

"Jerusha!" replied Barnaby, now with a mocking intonation which showed that he was really quite an actor, despite his disclaimer.

A low chuckling laugh here attracted Jim's attention, and turning sharply around, he confronted no less a person than Flash the Firefly.

CHAPTER VI.

A PRISONER.

THERE is nothing in this world quite so malicious as a woman scorned; and Flash the Firefly was such a one.

She had told Sam Bropey that her resentment against Happy Harry was due to his having balked the scheme of her life, and that he had been moved to this by a slight she had put upon him.

Far from this being true, the situation was exactly reversed.

With a persistence worthy of a better cause, she had paid court to Happy Harry; and he had roused her to insatiable hatred by repelling her with indifference.

The sure instinct of jealousy told her that she would have a formidable rival in Jim Dandy, if, as she suspected, the Dandy turned out to be a woman.

That Harry would eventually discover it, if he was not already apprised of it, she had no doubt.

Moreover, she had watched Jim Dandy till she satisfied herself that it was no sweetheart of Hicks's, or if it was, that Harry had "cut him out."

When she learned that her shot had not proved fatal, she was rather rejoiced than regretful.

"It will leave me a chance for a better revenge!" she had said to herself. "I will bring them together in my power, and wring their hearts before I give them the release of death!"

In pursuance of this malignant purpose she had used Sam Bropey to entrap Jim, how cleverly, we have seen.

His get-up as a starved prospector was her work. Unknown to Jim, his task was not a particularly hard one.

And now the woman stood in the first moment of her triumph.

"So! I have you, my dear!" she exulted, showing her teeth with a quivering of the upper lip that reminded one of a beast of prey.

Jim Dandy at once recognized her, and realized that his secret, if indeed he had such a one as she supposed, was no secret to this infuriate woman.

The cause of her rage was not hidden from him. His first sight of her had been in the abandon of her last appeal to Happy Harry.

"So it appears," he answered, coolly. "Having me, may I ask what you purpose to do with me?"

"You may ask what you please. I will answer what I please."

"Undoubtedly. I attend your pleasure."

"I shall not keep you in suspense longer than is unavoidable. But I will give you this for your comfort: whatever you forecast, the reality will be worse than you picture it."

"I have no doubt that it will be as bad as you can make it. However, no game is done till it is played out."

"You fancy you will get a chance to come back at me."

"I won the first trick, remember. Indeed, I fancy I may say, without conceit, the first two tricks."

And Jim Dandy shot a glance at his captor which brought the blood in a great surge into her cheeks.

Without giving her time to reply, he looked at her decoy, to whom this last passage at arms was not quite intelligible, and asked:

"Is this a lover of yours?"

"He is my husband," answered the Firefly, to Sam's palpable delight at her prompt acknowledgment.

"We was hitched with all the etceteras," he put in, as if this needed explicit statement.

"I wish you joy of her. You have a prize," said Jim, sarcastically.

"I have what suits me," answered Sam, with a swift flash of the eye that showed he would tolerate no disparagement of the woman he loved.

"I congratulate her on having such a defender," continued Jim. "She may need you before she is well through with this thing."

"You carry a stiff upper lip, boss," said Sam. "We've got you dead to rights, an' kin do what we like with you."

"For the present, yes. But does it occur to you that you may be engaged in unworthy work? In spite of the trick you have played me, I fancy I see some good in you."

"Oh, I know you're a woman," declared Sam. "Your rig might 'a' took me in ef I hadn't been put up to ye beforehand."

"And, being a woman, what do you think of yourself?"

"It would be low-down, I will say that, ef I was doin' it fur myself. But I'm standin' by my wife in whatever she says, you bet a hoss!"

"Come! Fetch her along!" ordered Flash the Firefly, to whom this discussion was far from interesting.

"March it is!" responded Sam, with a promptness which showed that, whatever his private sentiments, there was nothing to be hoped from his chivalry as against the Firefly's commands.

Indeed, to assure his wife of his entire allegiance, he seized Jim by the arm, almost roughly.

"If you will allow me, I will accompany you without violence," said Jim, with quiet dignity.

"All right," answered Sam, adding with a laugh: "Betsey Barnaby is mighty easy to git along with, ef ye only keep step to his pipin'."

He led the way. Jim Dandy followed. Flash the Firefly fetched up the rear.

Their destination was the hut in which we first came upon Sam Bropey in his despair.

"We have no time to lose," said the Firefly, peremptorily. "Let us dispose of her without delay, and go to the bagging of our larger game."

"We're 'lowin' to put you, miss, whar you won't git no flies on you," said Bropey. "Make yerself easy. No harm won't come to you tell we fetch it."

And going to the center of the room, he lifted a trap-door in the floor.

Jim Dandy could scarcely repress a shudder as he looked through the aperture thus opened. There was nothing to be seen through it but black darkness.

He could form no idea what sort of a pit this was the mouth to.

"Am I to be put down there?" he asked.

"Fur safe-keepin'," answered Sam, with a grin.

"I will give you any pledge—"

"We ain't pawnbrokers."

"All right. How am I to get down?"

"With a mite o' help."

Taking the end of a rope which lay coiled in a corner of the room, Sam tied it about Jim's body, under his arms.

The prisoner had no way of estimating the depth of the hole into which he was to be let down, the rope being indefinitely long.

"How deep is it?" he asked.

"Not so deep but I've been down it many a time myself," answered Sam. "You kin take the measure as you go down."

"Now then, are you ready?"

"Perforce. Go ahead."

Standing across a corner of the opening, Bropey swung his prisoner clear off his feet. Then the rope began to slip through his hands, and Jim plunged downward into the darkness.

For a moment he held his breath. The chill of the shaft seemed to strike through him to the very core of his heart.

"But this is cowardice!" said Jim, to himself.

"What is it I am afraid of? The darkness?"

And by an effort of will he braced his nerves.

"Sing out just before you reach the bottom," suggested Sam.

"I cannot tell. I can see nothing."

"Of course not. Listen fur it."

But in spite of his efforts to obey, Jim struck the bottom very unexpectedly, and got quite a jar in consequence.

"Thar you air!" cried Sam. "Now cast off."

It required some self-control to enable Jim to cut off his only means of communication with the upper world, though it was only through his mortal enemies.

He complied, however, knowing the futility of resistance.

"Now I reckon you'll be comfortable, an' above all, safe, till we come back."

"Am I to be left here without a light?"

"A light! Great Caesar's ghost! Do you think you're in a fu'st-class hotel?"

"Good-afternoon to you!"

"So-long! Ef you happen to think of anythin' you want, touch the electric button, an' the call-boy will be down."

The trap-door was then let down, and Jim heard Bropey walking over it.

Nothing had given him so vivid an impression of his imprisonment as this. The people of the upper world were walking over his head! It was as if he were in his grave, buried alive!

His first proceeding was to explore his prison.

He found that he had been let down in a mining-shaft. The bottom was rocky, as were the sides. In one direction he reached out in the void of a drift.

Nothing could be gained by exploring this drift; so, withdrawing into it sufficiently so that nothing accidentally falling down the shaft would strike him, he sat down to wait for his deliverance, with such patience as he could command.

Utterly helpless, in the power of a woman who had already attempted his life at the behest of that most implacable of passions, jealousy, Jim Dandy tried to forecast his probable fate.

He recalled the expression of her eyes. They had been ferocious. Evidently she held him in reserve for something that would glut her vengeance more fully than a swift death.

The silence was as utter as the darkness. They had left the hut, secure in his inability to climb the shaft.

Time passed, he could not guess how much.

He had only his thoughts as his measure, and they were so tumultuous that an hour might impress him as a minute, or a minute as an hour.

When it seemed as if he had been incarcerated for an age, he was electrified by the footstep for which he had strained his ears till the very sense ached.

The door of the hut opened, and he could hear a heavy tramping across the floor.

Straining his eyes upward through the darkness, he waited with bated breath for the first gleam of light.

Anything—let him see anything, so that that rayless darkness was pierced! Let him hear the sound of a human voice, if that of his worst enemy; only break that sepulchral hush!

He followed every step of his jailer, and his

heart came into his throat when he heard him at last stop in the center of the floor.

The trap-door was thrown up.

In the light of a candle Jim saw Bropey kneeling at the opening, and gazing down.

"Waal, pardner, how's how?"

In the first moment of reaction Jim could not find voice.

"Sulky, eh?" commented Bropey, "or maybe asleep. I'll rouse him out ef he ain't dead. Oh, yes! oh, yes! oh, yes!"

Surely none but the dead could withstand such a bellowing summons.

"You are wasting your breath," said Jim Dandy at last. "I am very far from dead or asleep. Nor am I sulky. What do you want?"

"Oh! You ain't dead, ain't you? An' you ain't asleep, ain't you? An' you ain't sulky, ain't you? Waal, we'll call it a mite deaf. But I reckoned when Gabri'l blowed his toot it 'u'd pry the wax out o' yer ears. What do I want? I want you up out o' thar!"

"You know the way to get me up."

"You bet I do. Ketch the end o' this hyar rope an' tie yerself on. Tie the thing to stay, or you'll hyear somethin' 'drap!"

Jim needed no caution in this direction.

While he was busy making himself secure, he could hear Flash the Firefly pacing the floor above with the restlessness of a wild beast in its cage.

She had not presented herself to view at the mouth of the shaft; nor had she as yet let her voice be heard.

There was that in her step which betokened a tempest of excitement.

Was it that her revenge was now so near?

Meanwhile, Sam Bropey was chattering away, as one who avoids a dreaded silence.

"I reckon you've had the blessin' o' good company down thar!" he laughed.

"I have been fairly satisfied," answered Jim.

"An' you've took it cool an' quiet while we was away? That's a famous place fur takin' things cool an' quiet. I know how it is myself!"

His humor might have been veined with a touch of bitterness. Sam could remember many an hour spent in that shaft when he had need of coolness, if not of quiet.

"I have been free from annoyance," said Jim. "When you're ready, you can heave away on that line."

"All right. Ease yerself up the sides. Now then! Heave-oh!"

Jim, of no great weight for Bropey's strength, was drawn up and landed without difficulty.

Perhaps by Bropey's planning, his back, as he clambered through the trap, was toward the point where Flash the Firefly stood.

The trap fell back to place, closing the opening, as he turned, only to stagger forward with a cry of despair, and to fall insensible on the floor.

CHAPTER VII.

DECOYED.

It lacked full an hour of darkness when Happy Harry set out in quest of his pard, though it was already long past their usual supper time.

"I'd better start now than later," Harry had said to himself. "I kin let on as I only come out to meet him; not as I was anyways anxious. Ef I waited till dark, he'd know I was huntin' him up."

He had a general notion in what direction to look for the Jim Dandy. If he was on his way back, he must come down the gulch up which Harry was riding.

However he reached a point where the chance of a divergence made everything uncertain.

He might go on, and miss the returning wanderer; and while he was stumbling about in the darkness and the mountain waste, Jim might be sitting comfortably at home, declaring that he was getting his deserts for his want of faith.

But this was not all that increased his anxiety. His hour of grace was well-nigh exhausted. The gray mists of evening were beginning to form in the valleys. The dusk hastening on.

Then he heard a footstep and the dislodgment of a pebble, and his face lighted up as if by magic.

"Blast his hide, thar he is at last! I'm a fool an' he'll tell me so!"

Nevertheless he looked well content with his folly.

"I'll play off as I'm as gay as a lark."

Indeed he was, just then; and it was not difficult for him to break into a rollicking song, after a trick of his own, which had given him his *sobriquet* of Happy Harry.

"I know a fair widder o' Frisco town.
First she married a Smith; then she married
a Brown.
An' now she's a chance fur to settle fur life,
Ef she'll only consent fur to be Jones's wife!
Oh Smith!
No kin an' no kith
Will she be to you up in Glory!
Oh Brown!
Ole mutton, you're down;
An' Jones has the best o' my story!"

While he was bellowing this canticle, improvised on the spur of the moment, at the top of his lungs, he could, of course, hear nothing but his own melodious voice.

When it was concluded, instead of hearing a responsive shout of laughter from his pard, as he expected, he was astonished to hear the galloping of a horse in full retreat.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "that can't be Jim! He hadn't no hoss. Who is it, then?"

And putting spurs to his horse, he dashed forward to a point where he could see beyond the rock that had thus far shut out his vision.

A cry of astonishment announced a very unexpected discovery.

And well might he exclaim; for scouring away at full speed he saw one who had been in his thoughts, yet almost the last person he would have chosen to meet.

"The Firefly!" he ejaculated, breathlessly. "She's never hung around these hyar diggin's all alone by herself. Who's she standin' in with, then? Why, with Purty Pete, o' course! An' Purty Pete, what's he up to? Jest what I was afraid of!"

"But they hain't got him yet, or she wouldn't be gallivantin' around like this hyar by herself. I reckon I'll ketch on to you, miss, an' hold you till I git my pard back."

While thus soliloquizing, Happy Harry was not sitting idly, you may believe.

The instant he caught sight of the Firefly, he gave chase at full speed.

If he could only have seen her face!
It was simply devilish in its glee!

"Ha! ha! Come on!" she cried, under her breath. "You have missed your pard already, have you? I thought you would. And you have a rope for me, I have no doubt, if you catch me. Well, I'll be doing you a service, by taking you to one you miss so sorely."

And, being well mounted, she spurred away at a speed that promised to give her pursuer quite a chase.

"Now give me light!" shouted Harry, gazing up into the gray sky.

Spur, quirt, voice—he plied all like a madman.

"Put all your life into the next ten minutes, an' then die!" he shouted to his horse. "Away! away! away!"

Never was a wilder chase.

"The fiend will overtake me before I am ready for him!" cried the Firefly, within herself.

And she plied spur and whip and voice in her turn.

"If either of us gets out of this without a broken neck, it will be a miracle!" she exclaimed, as her frantic horse bore her like the wind along a way which he ought to have picked with care.

But the girl was desperate.

"Let my life go, if I lose this revenge!" she cried. "On! on! Give me the hell of mutilation, or the heaven of seeing him writhe under the sting of my torture!"

Not less desperate was the man in pursuit.

With pitfalls at every step, he goaded his horse as if on the open plains.

"It's my pard, or nothin'! Ef I git her, I git him!"

And setting his teeth and shutting his eyes to the danger, he pressed on like pursuing death.

He cared nothing for the way the fugitive led him. He kept on her track, and he would do so if she leaped over a precipice!

Nearer! nearer he drew to her.

"He shall not take me! I will kill him!" cried the girl, her eyes blazing with desperation.

And she drew a revolver.

"Hah! That's your game, is it?" cried Harry. "Waal, I never raised my hand ag'in' a woman before; but I swear ef you put me afoot, I'll put you afoot! I hope the tumble won't break your purty neck!"

And he in turn drew a revolver.

Then they sped on, he steadily gaining.

"Pull up!" he shouted, when he was near enough. "I can drop you any minute I please; an' I don't mean to let you git away from me; you may bet your life on that!"

"You'll never take me alive!" she called back to him.

"Dead or alive, you're mine!"

"You'll make every point you get on me."

"I'm climbin' fur 'em!"

"Look out you don't take a tumble just when you feel surest."

"Drop me if you dare!"

"Will you shoot me?"

"You bet your life I will."

"Well, here goes!"

And turning in the saddle, she leveled her weapon, and fired at his horse.

Harry lined her horse, seeing that she was not shooting at him, but at the animal he bestrode, and waited the issue.

His finger trembled on the trigger.

The slightest wincing in his horse, indicating that he was hit, would have winged his merciless bullet; and he was a dead shot, even in full career.

"It's lucky for you," he said, when the peril was past, "that you don't know how to handle that weapon yet!"

"I'll practice," she answered, now past all fear with desperation.

Once more she leveled and fired.

The result was as before; yet, if she kept this up, chance might bring her disastrous success.

"You're temptin' the devil!" shouted Harry.

"He'll help you out on one o' them shots, jest to see you go down. I give you my word, I won't spare you!"

"When I ask odds of you, it will be time for you to talk. Here's another!"

And a third time she leveled the weapon.

But at the moment of firing, she saw Harry's horse stumble.

There was a flash of his revolver, and—

She caught her breath, but she rode on.

The bullet which she fully expected would end all, sped harmlessly by. Neither she nor her horse was hit.

"Ha! ha! That is your boasted marksmanship!" she scoffed, plucking up courage.

"That is my boasted marksmanship!" retorted Harry. "If at the last instant I hadn't seen that he wasn't goin' down, you would have been in a heap long before this. I couldn't stop the shot, but I could turn it fur enough to let you out."

And this was indeed the truth.

When his horse stumbled, he took no thought of saving himself, but only of getting in his shot where it would do instant and fatal execution, not on the woman, but on the animal that bore her.

He did not directly assail her life, since she was a woman; but he took the chance of breaking her neck in the fall.

In the instant when he perceived that his horse would recover his footing, he deflected his aim, though it was too late to arrest the contraction of his finger on the trigger.

But though he did not fall, the horse had received a sprain that perceptibly slackened his speed.

It was not that he was seriously disabled; but he was now timid.

"I can hold my own against him now—at least long enough," said the Firefly to herself.

And she desisted from further firing.

"She can't escape me," reflected Harry, watching the action of his horse, and the interval that yet separated him from his quarry.

"I am still gainin' on her. If he loses his grip, I'll fetch her down, assure as my name is Harry Hammond!"

Still the Firefly pressed on, and still he pressed after.

And now her eyes, if he could have seen them, were blazing again with triumph.

"I hope the tumble won't break his neck!" she muttered to herself. "I'm as kind to him as he is to me. I only want to save him for my revenge!"

Then, as she passed a certain copse, she said, in a low voice, and without looking at it:

"Don't kill him!"

"It was a breath, and she had sped by.

Unsuspecting, Harry pressed on.

"Surrender!" he cried. "I've got you, an' you know it!"

"Hang onto me," she retorted, looking back over her shoulder. "But look out for yourself."

Then she suddenly caught her breath, and drew hard on the rein, while her eyes stared with a fixed intensity.

Harry heard nothing. He caught the flash of something before his eyes that he took to be a falling twig.

He ducked, to escape being hit in the eyes, as he supposed.

He felt a sharp blow across his arms and low down on his breast; and the next instant Happy Harry lay stunned and bleeding on the rocky trail, while his horse sped on without him.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HEART ON FIRE.

WHEN Firefly and Sam Bropey left their prisoner in the mining-shaft, they immediately proceeded to the second act in their drama of revenge.

The Firefly mounted Bropey's horse, and Sam ran at the side, assisting himself with a grip on the animal's mane.

The Firefly had already detailed her plan to her colleague.

"Happy Harry will be uneasy at the absence of his pard. He will blame himself for letting her go alone; and by nightfall he will have worked himself into such a fever that he will set out in search of her."

"He will have half of the camp at his back," interposed Bropey. "I never see the boys enthruse so as they have over the Jim Dandy."

While Jim was recovering from the Firefly's shot, Sam had several times reconnoitered Hicks's Hurrah, and it was to his discovery that Jim was about to go on a prospecting trip alone that the Firefly owed her chance of capturing her rival.

"If he fetches a crowd with him, there will be nothing for us but to run for cover, and wait for another opportunity. It will be sure to come!" insisted the Firefly, a blaze of hatred in her eyes.

"An' ef he comes alone, what?" asked Bropey.

"I think he will come alone. He will have no clear ground for supposing that anything has happened to his pard, and so will not wish to stir the camp up for nothing. If I am right in this, he is ours!"

"Give me one crack at him; an', ours or somebody else's, he won't be o' no manner o' use to nobody!"

"I don't propose to give you a crack at him. I have my own plans for his disposal."

"Say, Nell! what be you 'lowin' to do? What makes you so close-mouthed about it?"

"Wait till we get him, and you'll see."

"All right! How be we goin' fur to git him?"

"You can throw a lasso—"

"You bet! I kin shoot a lasso as good as I kin shoot a pistol."

"It only remains, then, for me to fetch him within reach of your cast."

"An' will he come fur the askin'?"

"I think he will. I will station myself where I can see him coming. If he has a crowd, I will escape without letting them see me. If he is alone, I will come upon him as if by accident. Then I will turn to fly, and of course he will give chase."

"He'll 'low as you an' Pete is hangin' around, layin' fur gore; an' ef he claps on to you, he'll be solid fur his pard. By the way, what's become o' Pete, do you reckon?"

"He may be lying dead somewhere in the mountains," answered the Firefly, with no trace of feeling in the matter.

"Waal, Happy Harry has a nasty way o' slingin' cold lead," said Sam. "I reckon he didn't waste all his ammunition, ef Pete did manage to git away. He's as good fur coyote bait as fur anythin' else."

And Sam seemed well content with this disposal of the gambler.

So Bropey was stationed as we have seen, and the Firefly went to her role of decoy.

Nothing could have been more successful. Her victim fell into the snare without the slightest suspicion, and now lay bleeding and insensible at her feet.

The furious pace at which Harry was going made it impossible that the snub of the lasso should pluck him from the saddle without a terrible shock.

He would be lucky if the noose had not broken his ribs, or the fall fractured his skull.

The Firefly uttered a shriek of terror as she saw him fall.

"You have killed him!" she cried, wheeling her horse and riding back.

There was a fury in her voice that caused Bropey to look up at her searchingly.

Unmindful of the effect of her reproach, the girl threw herself almost frantically from the saddle, and down upon her knees beside the prostrate man.

She did not touch him, but with quivering hands outstretched over him, bent forward and gazed into his ghastly face.

"Is he dead?" she asked, with an awed hush in her voice.

Bropey made no reply, but, with a very curious expression in his eyes, stood watching her.

"Why don't you do something?" she demanded, whirling upon him furiously.

"What's to be done?" he asked, quietly. "You wanted him; you planned the gittin' of him; we've fotched him; hyar he is."

"But is he to be left to die?"

So far in the same unguarded tone, as a she-wolf might have demanded the life of her cubs. All of a sudden the consciousness of Bropey's white face and altered demeanor struck through her preoccupation.

She was betraying her real feelings toward the unconscious man! That was the gleam of rising jealousy in Sam's staring eyes!

The revelation came to her as a shock; but instead of throwing her into confusion, as it might have done a less consummate *intriguante*, and so ruining her cause, it stung her to the point of desperation which enabled her to rise with the occasion.

"Oh, you fool!" she cried, bursting into hysterical laughter. "An hour ago you were jealous of Pretty Pete; and now your fertile imagination has conjured up another lover in this scoundrel."

And in evidence of her contempt, she struck Harry's white face with the flat of her hand, and even spit into it.

"Come! come!" she went on, with an air of annoyance, "you have a poor opinion of yourself; and above all you make me tired! Am I to be forever defending myself against the insinuations of the devil that haunts you? Do you fancy that I am interested in every man I meet?"

"Ef you—"

But Bropey broke off.

"Let the cuss die!" he resumed, brutally.

"What do you want of him?"

"To get square with him before he dies! I'll turn him over to you after I get through with him. Won't that suffice?"

"Yes, that will! By all the furies, I'll put him through a course o' sprouts when I get him in my clutches!"

The viciousness with which Bropey delivered himself of this menace showed that, if the Firefly had allayed his suspicions, the hatred born of them survived in all its savage intensity.

Woe to Happy Harry when he lay helpless in the power of this madman.

"Meanwhile," said the Firefly, coldly, "we are losing time."

Sam knelt beside their victim, and proceeded to give him a really intelligent examination.

Though not a surgeon, nor indeed with any scientific knowledge of medicine, his life in the midst of bloody violence had given Sam a practical knowledge of wounds and bodily injuries of various sorts.

"He hain't broke no bones," he announced, after a careful examination. "His ribs is sound as mine."

"Never mind what is *not* the matter with him," interposed the Firefly, with fierce impatience. "The question is, what is the matter with him?"

"It's the crack on the topknot."

"Will he recover?"

"Maybe so; maybe not."

"Is his skull fractured?"

"I don't know."

A storm of furious passion swept through the Firefly.

"You don't care!" she cried. "What we want, and what I will have, is somebody who does know!"

"Who'll you git?"

"Doctor Fleetwood."

"How'll you git him?"

"You will fetch him."

"To my own shanty, an' tell him that this is my work? Shall I fetch the Vigilantes along, to hang me an' you after the doctor has had his say?"

"You will fetch the doctor; and you will fetch no Vigilantes."

"But leave him to put 'em on to us! That's better!"

"You will fetch the doctor, I say! But first this man must be taken to the Fort."

The Firefly spoke of Bropey's shanty by the name which had been given it because of its impregnable position.

Its early history included an account of the defeat of a storming party by one desperate man fighting single-handed.

Provision had been made for the transporting of a helpless man. The Firefly had forecast all the chances of her desperate scheme.

She went in pursuit of Happy Harry's horse, which had stopped after the loss of his rider;

while Sam Bropey cut two straight saplings, fastened them like fills on either side of the horses placed tandem, and stretched a blanket between them.

Into this litter he lifted the insensible Happy Harry, and so proceeded to his hut.

While Bropey led the forward horse, the Firefly fetched up the rear, her working features, as she gazed on the unconscious man, showing the shifting emotions that chased one another through her perturbed heart.

Now pity overpowered her; now, as she recalled how he had scorned her love, how he had turned to another, rage swept every softer feeling from the field.

The house reached, and Harry placed in Sam's bunk, the Firefly's first demand was that Jim Dandy be brought up out of his living tomb.

The craving of her heart was for revenge before all things else. Let her see the objects of her hatred writhing in torture like that which distracted her.

The spectacle, then, which greeted the Jim Dandy, was what he at once supposed to be the body of his murdered pard.

That he was really dead there was no shadow of a doubt in the mind of the spectator.

This wrung the cry of anguish from Jim, and sent him reeling insensible to the floor.

If the Firefly's suspicions were correct, and the Dandy was a woman, and in love with Happy Harry, here was the wreck of her life's happiness.

"H'm!" growled Bropey, "she takes the thing to heart."

Then a throe of jealousy wrung from him:

"I wonder, ef that was me, would thar be sich a howl about it."

The Firefly paid no attention to this thrust.

She had stopped in her restless tramp as the Dandy appeared above the trap, and prepared a grin of devilish glee for his reception.

It enraged her to be so quickly robbed of her triumph.

Striding forward, she pushed the body of her insensible rival with her foot.

"This is a woman's escape," she said. "How I hate myself for being one! But she will rouse again and remember. I have that hold upon her! Put her back into that hole. I have no further use for her just now. I don't care to have a hand-to-hand tussle with her while you are gone for the surgeon."

"About that surgeon. We hain't got him yet."

"One thing at a time. Put her back in the shaft."

"Shan't we wait till she comes to?"

"No."

"How'll she untie herself when she gits to the bottom?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Firefly, turning upon the speaker with a flash of amazement and scorn. "Is your heart softening toward her? I believe, on my soul, that I have better cause for jealousy than you! Ha! ha! I jealous of *you*!"

Her tongue was like a lash of scorpions. It might be love for him that made her so fierce. It might be hatred for one who had power to divide the allegiance of even so abject a slave as this lover of hers.

"I? Me?" stammered Sam.

"You know very well that you could carry her down, if necessary. But it is not. You can fix a tight in the rope so that you can release it from above, after she has reached the bottom."

"I'll do it that way, if you like," said Sam, not stopping to argue further the state of his feelings toward their victim.

"Do it!" commanded the Firefly, tersely.

Doubling the rope at the proper length, Sam tied it once more about Jim's body, so that he could let him down with one end, and then loosen the knot by pulling on the other.

Thus returned to his prison, the Jim Dandy lay insensible at the bottom of the shaft, with now the bitterest memory of his life awaiting his recovery of consciousness.

Sam shut down the trap, and stood ready for a return to the question of procuring the surgeon.

"There is another thing to be done while you are getting the surgeon," said the Firefly. "Here is the cartridge-belt worn by that girl. Put a bullet through the middle of the back, smear it with blood to look as if it were on her when the shot went through it, and while you are in Hicks's Hurrah pin it to the door of the dance-house with Happy Harry's bowie. That will announce the capture of both of them. Hicks's Hurrah hasn't heard the last of me!"

"All that's easy enough," said Sam; "an' it's a stavin' idee. I'll make them fellers' eyes bug out when they see it!"

The love of sensation usual with such a man made Sam enter heartily into this scheme.

He grinned and rubbed his hands in pleased anticipation.

When his instrumentality in the affair became known, as it was sure to be in the course of time, it would add to his prestige as a dashing ruffian, and, if anything, make the punishment of his crime less likely.

"But," he went on, "we hain't got the surgeon yet. How air we to git him?"

"You go to him in disguise, and tell him that there is a wounded man needing his attendance. Of course he will come with you, knowing that he has nothing to fear personally. You require that he submit to be blindfolded. This too he will concede. Why shouldn't he? It is business to succor men without reference to who they are, or how they come to be wounded."

"Oh, Doc'll come along easy enough. But the trick will be to find him alone, so's to git at him without the crowd gittin' onto me."

"You have to manage that according to circumstances. But if he is drunk, and you have any trouble about getting him to come, capture him, and fetch him along willy-nilly! I am bound to get an hour's consciousness out of this fellow, no matter at what cost."

"You're bound to have your way—I know that! You always was, an' you always got it."

Having prepared the cartridge-belt as she directed, Sam set out on his mission.

He was scarcely out of hearing when the Firefly cast herself on her knees beside the unconscious Harry, and twined her arms about him with a stormy outburst of passionate love.

"You! you of all things living or dead! you are the only thing that I love, that I ever did love! Oh, my darling! my murdered darling! Come back to me! Awake! Oh, has my voice no power over you? If I were dead, a thousand times dead, and you should call upon me so, I would come back, from heaven or from hell, to rejoin you! Harry! Harry! don't you hear me?"

She fondled him, as a tigress might fondle her dead mate.

She kissed his forehead; she stroked his cheek with her hand; she strove to infuse life and warmth into his chill lips from her own.

The fire of her love made them pulse and glow, though till now they had been blue with the sluggish flow of blood from her chilled heart.

In vain she pressed him to her bosom, as if to make her bursting heart beat for him too.

He lay as still, as white, as he would ever lie in his coffin.

Then she poured a rain of tears upon his face, sobbing as if her heart would break.

But soon the tigerish side of her nature resumed its sway.

As the old heathens, in their hour of despair, were ready to coerce the very gods to their service, she would have pulled the heavens down about her, if possible, that all might perish in a common wreck.

How she stormed about the room, now fiery supplications streaming from her lips, now shrill execrations of superhuman revolt.

Imprisoned in the shaft, Jim Dandy recovered consciousness, and heard her with curdling blood.

Only when her voice rose shrillest, in her paroxysms of rebellious fury, could he distinguish her words; but the cadences of her voice told when she cast herself upon Harry's body, and poured out her stormy passion upon him.

Jim rose to his feet and stood trembling as he listened, fain to stop his ears and shut out her blasphemies, yet straining all his soul through his ears to catch the faintest sound which would indicate the revival of his partner.

This lasted so long that he gave up all hope.

"He is dead! dead! dead!" he cried.

Then his heart swelled with indignation that this abominable woman should be permitted to defile his dear dead with her hideous passion.

A cry of angry protest burst from his lips, as he stared up through the black darkness of his prison.

He did not hope to produce any effect by it, but it happened at a moment when the Firefly was silent from exhaustion, as she lay across the body of the man she loved so inordinately, clasping him in her passionate embrace.

She heard the cry from below, and it recalled to her the prisoner whom she had forgotten.

Springing up, she rushed to the trap, threw it back with a bang, and kneeling on the verge of the opening, stared down into the blackness with all the deep hatred of her soul in her eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

BARGAINING FOR A LIFE.

"ARE you recovered, down there?" cried the Firefly, staring down into the darkness, though of course nothing could be seen below.

"I am recovered, and I hear you," replied the Jim Dandy. "Wretched woman! where is your dignity? Have you no shame, no decency? What right have you to deport yourself as you are doing over a man who would spurn you from him were he alive to do it?"

Jim's indignant protest ended in a sob, as he thought of that dear, dead face, in which he would never again see the light of recognition.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Firefly, derisively. "It galls you, does it, to see me in the place you would be only too glad to fill."

"I could never by any possibility occupy so degraded a position as yours," answered Jim.

"High or low, you will never occupy it. But tell me, do you love him?"

Jim made no reply. Only a heart-broken sob was stifled in his throat.

"You may be frank with me," pursued Flash. "There is nobody but us two to hear you, and of course I have penetrated your secret."

"Whether you have penetrated my secret, as you say, or not," replied Jim, steadily, "I have no wish to hold any conversation with you on a subject which can receive only desecration from your lips."

"I will not quarrel about your impertinence," said the Firefly. "I have too much the advantage over you to insist upon sweetness of temper, my dear. But my question is not prompted by idle curiosity. I have a proposition to make to you."

"Spare yourself the trouble. I shall listen to no proposal of any sort from you."

"It will be because you stop your ears with your fingers if you don't! Here is what I wish to say. I suppose you fancy that you are in love with this man. Well, you don't know what the grand passion is. It means win all or lose all!"

"Now I, without hesitation or evasion, declare my love for him. That love is a raging fire within me. It will make me an angel of tenderness, or a devil of fury, according as it is taken. My love cries out for possession! possession! possession! There is not a spark of generosity in it. I leave that for fools who don't know what they really want."

"I fancy that you are one of those fools, and it is because of this that I am going to make you my proposal."

The Firefly paused, but Jim made no reply.

However, he was listening with all his ears, in spite of his declaration to the contrary.

"I have reason to believe that Harry is not dead, though he has lain so long unconscious. However, I think he is so desperately hurt that he will owe his recovery to careful nursing, such as either you or I could give him."

At the announcement of hope Jim Dandy had silently clasped his hands.

He could scarcely repress a murmur at the suggestion that he might be Happy Harry's nurse.

"Either you or I," repeated the Firefly. "The question is, which shall it be, if either? But this is my ultimatum: it shall be I, if either. What do you say to that? Will you yield, or shall he die?"

Jim Dandy held his breath, but answered not a word.

"I will go further," pursued the Firefly, "to show you of what sort is my love. I have him absolutely in my power, and I will kill him rather than let him escape me!"

Jim gasped, but still held his peace.

"Now then," proceeded the Firefly, "will you give him up, to save his life? Will you go away, if I release you? Will you disappear so that he shall never learn of your whereabouts, any more than if you were buried under ground?"

In the darkness Jim Dandy buried his face in his hands. The emotions that swept through and over him seemed as if they would burst his struggling heart.

Still he repressed every sound.

"All I ask," went on the Firefly, "is a free field. I have every reason to believe that I can obliterate any impression that you may have made upon him. You came upon us in a moment of estrangement."

"He loved me well enough till a little while ago, when we quarreled. I admit that it was my fault. I delighted in my power over him. You know his cool way. Nothing ever ruffles his happy-go-lucky humor. Well, I found that I could goad him out of it, and I wanted to parade him as my slave."

"Grant that it was more vanity than love with me then. But when I had stung him to open revolt, I found that secretly I had cared for him as I never did for any one else."

"But his pique was fully aroused; and seeing that he had turned the tables on me, he resolved to burn me with my own fire."

"Then you came; and you know the rest."

"Now, I do not think that he knows you for anything but the pard that you profess to be. As his pard, I am not afraid of you. Men do not mourn inconsolably for men. But if he were to discover your sex, the case might be different. The romance of it might catch his fancy. That risk I am resolved not to run."

"Abandon him without letting him know, and I do not fear my ability to win him back. Refuse to abandon him, and you certainly will never see the light of day again. If he discover my hand in your taking off, and so turn from me, he shall not live."

"Do you fancy that I can go through what I have just gone through, and then settle down to the knowledge that the man on whose account I have so suffered is in the arms of another?"

The excitement of the Firefly was returning. The precariousness of her great stake was pressing upon her. Hatred was again gnawing at her heart-strings.

Her story of her relations with Happy Harry had told profoundly on the listening Jim. It had all the seeming of literal and circumstantial truth.

Moreover, the first meeting of the Firefly and Happy Harry under the Jim Dandy's eye—of which we shall hear presently—seemed to corroborate it.

So deeply did it strike the rankling iron into his heart, that Jim had cast himself face-downward on the rocky floor of the shaft, to writhe in mute despair.

Some sound in the room above, inaudible to the Dandy where he lay, attracted the Firefly's attention.

She looked up with a quick start, her face suddenly glowing with eager expectancy.

Then she bent far down through the trap, and cried with a hushed insistence:

"Speak quickly! Will you give him up? It is your last chance. Yes, or no? It is life or death to him and you! You shall go free, without a breath of injury. I swear it! Will you do it? Will you? Will you?"

"Never!" shouted Jim, suddenly leaping to his feet. "Never! never!"

It was such an outburst as nothing had ever drawn from him before.

"Do you fancy," he continued, "that I would expose him to the tender mercies of such a wretch as you?"

"Not that there is any danger of his entanglement in your snares. Oh, no! You have been lying to me. He has always scorned you and laughed at you as he did when I first saw you together. How could a man such as he be attracted by such a shameless monster as you have proved yourself to be? For him who cannot defend himself, I spurn you and your slanders!"

But here Jim broke down.

"After all, he is dead! dead! dead!" he moaned.

The Firefly did not hear this.

She heard, however, the contemptuous rejection of her proposal, and with an inarticulate cry of rage, she sprang up and sought to slam to the trap-door.

Her failure was due to the door, as it swung over, catching in her dress, as she sprang toward the side of the room where Happy Harry lay.

In her absorption in something that engaged her attention there, she did not heed the tearing of her dress. She gave the door an additional push, but only enough to hold it in an upright position for a moment. When it lost this momentary balance, it fell backward instead of forward, leaving the trap open instead of closing it.

This the Firefly was too much occupied to notice.

From his position at the bottom of the shaft, Jim Dandy stared up into the room above, listening with all his soul to discover what had affected the Firefly so.

Was it the return of Sam Bropey, or—or—The Jim Dandy was choking with the alternative possibility.

"Can it be that he is alive?—that he is recovering consciousness? Oh, Harry! Harry! Harry!"

It was only a heart cry. No sound came from the quivering lips of the listener.

It was the recovery of the wounded man, at last.

Happy Harry had moved, then opened his eyes, then sat abruptly up in bed.

He had a dim consciousness of a familiar voice coming faintly to his ears. Whether it was to the outer ear, or only to the ear with which we hear in dreams, he could not tell.

Whose voice it might be, even if indeed a voice at all, was equally uncertain.

He awoke to consciousness with a glow at the heart, and the intimation of its cause so fleeting that he could not firmly grasp it.

What he saw was the Firefly springing toward him, her arms outstretched, her soul appealing to him through her eyes.

CHAPTER X.

PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES.

THE sight of the Firefly springing toward him, caused the wondering expectancy in Happy Harry's face to give place to a stern repellence that pierced her to the heart.

In the abandon possible to only so unrestrained a nature, she cast herself at his feet, crying:

"Ah! will you never forgive me? Trample upon me! I am yours! I love you! I shall always love you!"

It was the old trick, with which she had swayed Sam Bropey and many another.

I love you; I am wretched at your feet; forgive me!

Happy Harry passed his hands before his eyes in the vague way of one just recovering from insensibility.

Below, in his prison, Jim Dandy hung upon his first words.

They came, in strong, clear tones.

"Whar's my pard?"

With a smothered murmur Jim Dandy cast himself once more face-downward on the floor of the shaft.

But now he was not struggling with despair. Now his heart was bounding as if it would leap from his breast.

He had to reinforce his will by claspings both hands hard over his mouth, to prevent it from shouting, whether he would or no:

"Harry! Harry! Harry!"

With her back toward the trap, the Firefly did not know that it was open, so that her words, penetrating to the depths of the shaft, were liable to call forth contradiction like an echo.

"Your pard?" she repeated, with well simulated ignorance. "I know nothing of him. But your fall from your horse—you will not believe that I did it, Harry? You will not believe that I could really fire at you? I was afraid of your anger, you looked so terrible. But I would not have harmed you, even to save myself. Oh, you will believe it, Harry? And I will nurse you. I will give every hour of my life to your service."

"Do not tax yourself so, dear! You are weak. See! you are faint. Oh, lie down. Let me ease you."

She would have put her arm about him, and let him gently back upon the pillow.

He waved her back, brushing his hand once more across his eyes, and fighting off the faintness that threatened again to prostrate him.

"Enough of that," he said, disdainfully. "Answer me! Whar's my pard? That devil? What have you done with him—you an' that devil?"

"I swear to you!" cried the Firefly, "I have not seen him. I know nothing about him."

Jim Dandy heard this in amazement.

"What brazen impudence!" he cried within himself. "I will denounce her!"

He was on the very point of revealing himself, when a thought froze his voice in his throat.

What if he brought her to confusion, as he could so easily do?

He recalled her bloody menace:

"I have him absolutely in my power! I will kill him rather than let him escape me!"

And she would do it—Jim knew she would.

So she could afford to brave him. The one chance for the life of the pard he was ready to die for, was his absolute silence.

He was thus doomed to helpless listening as this drama proceeded.

There was one comfort in it, however, the full assurance of Harry's invulnerability to the enchantress's wiles!

Let her weave her web of lying intrigue! She might kill; she was powerless to affect Harry's loyalty to his pard!

"It is between you," Harry insisted, in reply to the Firefly, "you or Purty Pete. But as you are standin' in together, o' course what one does the other's into."

"But I am not in with Pete. I have not seen him since I left him fighting with you."

"On the day you put that bullet into my pard!"

If you wasn't a woman, I'd square up with you fur that! But, woman or no woman, if he hadn't got well, I'd 'a' hunted you—

"Bah! We're gettin' off the point. Will you own up? What have you done with my pard?"

"I have given you my oath."

"It ain't worth the breath it cost you!"

"Whar's Purty Pete? I'll make it worth his while to compromise this matter."

"Again I tell you, I know nothing about Pretty Pete."

"An' again I tell you, you—air mistaken!"

"I can do nothing more, if you refuse to believe me."

"If you will excuse me, I never did believe you, except when you wereshoutin' for Number One. But to prove to you that my wits ain't wool-gatherin', as you may suppose, an' I know what I'm talkin' about, I'll be obliged to you if you will tell me how I happened to be roped like a steer, if Purty Pete wasn't at the other end o' the line? Do you suppose I don't know a lasso when I see it?"

"You were roped, but not by Pretty Pete," admitted the Firefly.

She knew how to acknowledge the corn handsomely, when there was no doubt as to her being "down."

"Oh! I was roped, eh? Waal, that honest confession, I hope, will be good fur your soul. But, thar! I don't want to be rough on you. Suppose we talk this thing over quietly. Who roped me?"

"Sam Bropey."

"A left-handed cousin o' yours! Oh, excuse me! Will you tell me how he happened to be jest whar he was, so handy?"

"We were almost within stone-throw of his house."

"Is this it?"

"Yes."

"An' you was runnin' to cover hyar?"

"Yes."

"I suppose this is whar you've hung out since you shook Hicks's Hurrah."

"It is."

"Waal, that ain't no business o' mine. I reckon you have a right to go whar you please."

"You might easily make it your business, Harry."

"No, thank you! We won't have any more o' that, if it's all the same to you."

"Love her!" cried Jim in his exultant heart. "Would it be possible for a man who had ever cared the least bit in the world for a woman, to speak to her like that?"

"Oh, if we ever get out of this scrape, it will be worth all it has cost to me—ay, a thousand times over!"

"I might never have quite laid that ghost of suspicion. I would never have owned the jealousy, even to myself; but now I know it is without a shadow of foundation, I am not afraid to face it."

"Will you tell me whar Bropey is now?" continued Harry.

The Firefly did not reply at once but looked at him fixedly.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Why don't you speak?"

"I suppose you will shrink from me," answered the Firefly. "Nothing that I have ever done for you has been received as I would receive the same act, if you had done it for me."

"Waal, what have you done fur me now?" asked Harry, with an air of indifference that was certainly exasperating.

"I thought that he had killed you. Of course it was for me. He saw you pursuing me, and unhorsed you to save me. But, as I said, I thought he had killed you; and—and—"

The Firefly broke off, and started anew with a question, as if to test his feelings before committing herself.

"Suppose—suppose," she said, "I had shot him?"

"Waal," answered Harry, with the indifference of incredulity, "fur one thing, you would never have got me in hyar."

"I thought of that," she answered, evidently not taken by surprise by this retort. "If you were alive, your chance would be better with shelter than without it. I got him to fetch you here."

"That was less tragic, an' more sensible," said Harry, with the quiet sneer which he seemed unable to repress while talking to the woman before him.

"When you were here," went on the Firefly, "we tried to resuscitate you for a long time. Nothing came of our efforts. I made up my mind that you were indeed dead."

"And then?" queried Harry, seeing by her manner that there was more to come.

"I sent him to Hicks's Hurrah for a surgeon."

"Which he hasn't got back with yet?"

The Firefly's eyes were fixed upon Harry's face with penetrating intensity. She seemed to be struggling to retain her composure while she watched every line in his countenance. She had the air of a woman who was deliberately staking her all on a single cast of the die.

"Which," she said, now in a husky, choking voice, while her face became paler and paler with suppressed emotion—"which he will never get back with!"

Her voice, deepening, died away to almost inaudibility. She leaned forward, her lips falling apart, her breath suspended.

"What do you mean?" cried Harry, startled out of his skepticism by her tragic manner.

She shut her eyes as if she had not the courage to see the effect of her next words, and went on with a rush, her voice now raising clear and strong, as if with desperation:

"I thought he had killed you—remember that! I followed him in the darkness and shot him. You asked where he is now. You will find him lying dead at the foot of the cliff, just where the ledge makes the only entrance to this place."

"I love you, Harry!—I love you!"

She was on her knees at the side of the bunk. As the last wailing plea died on her lips, she fell forward, as if in a swoon.

Nothing could have had more the appearance of truth than this seeming confession.

"What a liar!" ejaculated Jim Dandy, where he listened. "But how can she hope to profit by anything so easily disproved? Bropey will be here before daybreak with the surgeon. Does she hope to induce Harry to leave the place before he gets back?"

Far from it. He did not yet guess the desperation of this woman.

She had planned the end while she invented the beginning. If her story carried with Harry; if her crime won what her tenderness had failed to win, she would go out and meet Sam Bropey and make good her words.

Of course, in this she would only be protecting herself from his revenge. She could not allow him to enter there and find her in this relation with another than himself.

But Happy Harry was not attracted by this mark of his passion for him, though he was for the moment quite taken in by her acting.

"You monster!" he cried, casting her off from him.

"What!" she cried, springing up with the savage fury of one who has lost all. "You call me monster?—you, when it is for love of you that I have branded myself with crime?"

"Eh!" he ejaculated, seeing her drawing a weapon. "Is this another mark of your love? You mean to kill me!"

"I do! This is your last insult!"

"Fiend!" he cried, springing out of the bunk. "Let me strangle you and end your career of mischief!"

His strong emotion fascinated her. She had never before seen him so roused. If there had been a shadow of hope of winning him even yet, she would have fallen at his feet in adoration.

As it was, she longed to let him live as long as possible, that she might gloat on his passionate beauty.

"Do not touch me!" she exclaimed, withholding her fire, and backing away from him toward the open trap.

He did not see this pitfall. He only saw the hideous distortion of her ghastly face, in its inhuman blending of worshipful admiration with the resolve to kill.

He sprang for her, not intending to realize his threat, but only to disarm her, and to save his own life.

She did not fear his violence; but she did fear the loss of her opportunity.

"Good-by!" she said. "It is because I love you! I love you! I love you! Ah! Oh, God!"

The shot might have pierced her own heart, for the anguish it gave her as it sped.

From where he stood, rooted with horror and dumb with helpless despair, Jim Dandy saw the flash, followed by an explosion, a cry of rage and pain, and the crash of falling bodies.

The head and an arm of the Firefly hung limp over the edge of the trap. Her long hair, torn from its fastenings, streamed straight down into the darkened pit.

Not a sound! not a stir! The dead silence and motionlessness of death rested on all.

A moment the Jim Dandy stood staring up at this ghastly spectacle. Then, with a great cry, he fell senseless to the floor of his prison.

CHAPTER XI.

A HIGH-HANDED PROCEEDING.

SAM BROPEY was the sort of man who never means to fail in anything he undertakes.

He had always made a special point of this where the Firefly's wishes were concerned. She had only to speak, and if it was within the power of man, he looked to the accomplishment.

When she deserted him for her iniquitous partnership with Pretty Pete, he was at a stand.

He might have recaptured her bodily; but that would not have met his wishes.

He loved her, with a tenderness quite unexpected in so rough a fellow as he; and what he wanted in return was her free preference.

Of course he could not compel this by physical violence.

It was this, and not cowardice, that had kept him inactive, gnawing his heart out while he cudged his brain for some means of winning her from that scheme for "cutting a dash" in Paris.

"Purty Pete be blowed!" he had said to himself many a time. "I'd swallow him, ef he was the only thing what stood in my way!"

Through all his suffering he had never been really jealous of the gambler. Pete was too hideous to inspire belief in his personal attractions for any one.

But Happy Harry was quite different; and the more Sam thought of him, the less did he relish the Firefly's interest in him.

Why did she hate him so fiercely? The more he debated that question, the less was he inclined to fetch a doctor to his possible rival.

However, he would do it, if Doc Fleetwood was accessible. But, as he had predicted, Doc lay dead drunk in one of the saloons of Hicks's Hurrah; and to get possession of him it would be necessary to take him bodily.

Of course it would be impossible to carry him off under the eyes of his friends; yet Sam did not despair of accomplishing his purpose.

There was nothing to prevent him from sharing openly in the revelry at Hicks's Hurrah. His face had not been a very familiar one there during the Firefly's partnership with Pretty Pete; but its appearance excited no remark.

He drank and gambled out the evening, apparently in high spirits. Indeed, he started all sorts of horse-play, finally coming upon the "snoozing" surgeon seemingly by accident.

"Hullo, boys!" he shouted, "what's this hyar? Doc Fleetwood, an' drunker'n a biled owl! Say, fellers! how'll we fix him? What do ye say to puttin' him under the pump?"

But objections were raised to this.

No one stated the real grounds for protecting the surgeon from the proposed practical joke; but the fact was, he was a man of rather stilted dignity, and a known dead-shot.

Sousing in the water would restore him to consciousness; and his recognition of his persecutors might be the occasion of a thinning out of the population of the camp when he was himself again.

"Let the Doc guzzle as much as he's a mind to," urged one of his protectors. "He's a heap sight better corned than he is sober; an' ef you'll hark to me, you won't do nothin' what'll discourage his keepin' in prime condition."

Others joined in, to somewhat the same purpose, till Sam laughingly cut them short.

"Oh, I see through you cusses! Waal, we won't say nothin' about it. But we'll fix the thing to your notion."

"Thar can't be nothin' ag'in' packin' him off to bed, an' layin' of him out in decent Christian shape. What's the word? Candles at his head, an' candles at his feet; an' a bootful o' whisky on his stomach fur to show what killed him. When he wakes up, he'll 'low as he's the fust galoot out in glory."

The boys were ready enough for any sport to which the Doc would not be likely to take exception, if he caught them at it.

"Fetch a shutter, Andy!" shouted one.

"We'll lay him out on two chairs—"

"Hold on, you galoots!" objected the saloon-keeper. "Don't you 'low as I want to shut up my shebang some time to-night?"

"Why, consarn your liver an' lights! be you goin' fur to stop the funeral percession while you dump your ash-cart?"

"You bet yer sweet life you don't have no funerals with my property. Thar's a plank what 'ud orter do ye. What's the matter with that?"

"Hang his ole shutter! Fetch the plank, Andy. Two of 'em! We don't want the Doc to roll off on the floor."

"That's the ticket! Give him elbow-room."

"Take planks to your notion; but leave my shutter alone."

"Clap the shutter over that snoozer's mouth! He p'isons us, an' then grudges us Christian burial! Fetch along the plank!"

"Doc'll be a planked shad!"

"You'll wish you was a shad-oh, ef he gits a chance to blow a hole through ye!"

"Ef he was as big a blower as you, my chance would be slim."

With such chaff the surgeon was stretched on the flat of his back on the plank.

"Now mount him, boys. We'll have a pur-cession through the camp!" proposed Sam.

Catching at this idea, ready hands lifted the unconscious inebriate to equally willing shoulders.

So the mock procession was formed, lighted by candles stuck in the necks of bottles.

Through the camp they marched, howling dismally, to the huge amusement of the spectators along the line of march.

Sam Bropey was the acknowledged leader of the frolic, and it was at his suggestion that Fleetwood was placed in an abandoned shanty on the outskirts of the camp.

The plank on which the inebriate lay was supported at the ends on two boxes, and flanked on either side by an additional plank, so that he could turn over without "taking a tumble." The candles were set around in a circle on the floor. The doctor's boots were removed, and set at the foot of his bier, filled with water.

After a doleful howl in concert, he was here abandoned to sober off at his leisure.

What would have been the surprise of the bacchanals, if, instead of being sodden in liquor, they had been awake and observant after the camp had settled into silence and darkness?

Sam Bropey, who had ostentatiously left the camp for home, against the protests of his friends, while the carousal was yet in full course, returned stealthily, and pined the cartridge belt to the door of the dance-house with a single jab of the bowie.

He then went to the abandoned shanty, blew out the candles, and clapping the muzzle of his revolver to the surgeon's temple, shook him into consciousness.

There are few things more effective in sobering a man than a suggestion of death by violence.

The doctor was at first disposed to be pugnacious, but the electrifying touch of cold iron and the discovery that he was unarmed brought him to his senses.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "You've got me. What do you want?"

For answer Sam emptied the water out of his boots, and threw them down on the floor before him, with an inarticulate growl to intimate that he wanted instant and unquestioning obedience.

The doctor saw that his captor was a masked man, who was not disposed to disclose his identity by speaking.

His boots on, Sam made him stand with his back toward him, in which position he bound his eyes about with a piece of cloth.

Then clapping the muzzle of the revolver to his head again, to intimate the danger of revolt, he marched him out of the camp without obstruction.

Fleetwood tried to draw his captor into conversation, but failed. He finally relapsed into silence, submitting himself to his fate.

He had no fear of personal danger, his professional services evidently being in demand; yet, after he had proceeded he knew not how far, though it seemed to him miles, he suddenly heard the explosion of a pistol, and with a sharp cry ending in a moan he fell forward on his face.

The shot came so without warning that Sam Bropey stood stock still, staring about, and then down at his fallen companion.

The doctor might be shamming, but there could be no doubt of the shot.

However, so astounded was he, that it was not till a second stung his flesh like the touch of hot iron, that Sam recovered himself, and dropped to the ground as if shot in turn.

He had two objects in adopting this course instead of running away.

In the first place, he wanted to make sure that his companion was really shot. In the second, he wanted to ambush his hidden assailant.

A quick passage of his hands over the surgeon satisfied him of the genuineness of the latter's prostration. He had been shot very nearly, if not quite, through the heart.

Then Sam waited perfectly motionless for his assailant to come up and examine his work.

In this he was disappointed. Whoever he

was, the secret assassin was too "fly" to run any such risk.

Having assured himself of this fact, Sam crept away, and made his way home as fast as he could.

"It's the Firefly!" he said, to himself. "The hussy has waylaid me to finish me off. She's took up with that other one. That's what she got me to bring him in fur. Waal, give me one more chance at her—that's all I ask! A blasted fool! a blasted fool!"

Reaching his hut, he approached it with the utmost caution.

Not a sound indicated its occupancy by any living being.

The light, however, was still burning.

"They've vacated the premises," he declared. "Or maybe she's ambushin' me, ag'in' her first shot failin'."

When, after long maneuvering he ventured to enter the house, he stood in profound astonishment at the scene that greeted him there.

CHAPTER XII.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

THE disposition of things in his shanty changed Sam's theory at once. At first he thought that these two had fallen victims to the same assailant that had laid out the doctor and so nearly finished him. But examination gave him another view.

"He's come to, an' ketched on to the girl down below thar. Nelly must 'a' had the trap open talkin' to her—pokin' her up, I reckon. Then he climbed out o' bed, an' reached fur Nell, an' she laid him out. But he got in on her, an' fetched her to grass along with him. Thar's whar she knocked her head, an' doused her glim. But I'll fetch her out o' that in two shakes."

He lifted her tenderly from the floor, kissing her and letting his arms linger about her after he had laid her on her bunk.

"She said I was a fool fur 'lowin' as she cared fur him; an' I reckon that's so," he mused. "I wish't I had the cuss what knocked the spots out o' Fleetwood. I reckon she'll 'low as I salted him, so's not to have to fetch him hyar."

But at the point he heard a voice calling to him from the depths of the shaft.

"Is that you, Sam Bropey?"

"You bet yer sweet life it is."

"Will you help me out of here?"

"I will so; an' git you to tell me what's been goin' on hyar."

"What you won't very much like to hear!"

But here the Firefly's changed position began to tell. She stirred; and Bropey, whose interest in her was greater than in the Jim Dandy, ran back to her.

She came to in his arms.

"He is dead?" was her first demand, when she had gazed about till her eyes encountered the motionless body of Happy Harry.

"You laid him out?"

"I was forced to. He attacked me."

"Sam Bropey, will you let me out, and listen to what I have to tell you?" came the voice of Jim Dandy up out of the shaft.

"What is that? That hussy! Shut the trap down, and leave her to starve to death!"

And the Firefly sprung up, to carry out her own purpose.

"Will you let her fool you forever? From first to last, she has pulled the wool over your eyes. What a stupid ass you are, not to see through her! Who but a man so besotted with his own passion would fail to see that she was in love with the man she has killed?"

With a concentrated shriek of rage, the Firefly caught up her revolver from the floor, where it had fallen from her hand as she went down under Happy Harry's weight; and springing to the trap, she began to fire rapidly down into the darkness.

A derisive laugh came from below—such a laugh as one might yet give utterance to when life held nothing more but pain and vengeance.

"Will you let her silence me, the only one who can tell you the truth? Will you try to cling to your fool's paradise till she kills you too, in a fit of disgust at your gullibility?"

As if by magic, an abrupt change came over the Firefly.

She turned, and saw Sam staring at her with such a light in his eyes as she had never before called into them.

She realized that the loss of her temper had betrayed her into a wrong way of meeting the situation that now confronted her.

It was impossible to prevent the revelation of the truth. She must seem to welcome it, and trust to her wits to avert its force.

"Come!" she said, with a shrug of her shoul-

ders. "A woman in a pet is always wrong. This promises to be interesting. Let us have her out of there, and see what sort of a case she will make out. I may learn something for future use. I have always revenges on hand."

And with a smile of contemptuous indifference, she went and sat down on the edge of the bunk, swinging one foot carelessly.

Without a word Sam let the rope down into the shaft, and drew Jim to the surface.

The Dandy's first glance was at the prostrate body of his pard.

Throwing himself on his knees beside it, he gazed into the white face, with its closed eyes.

Not a word, not a sound of mourning did he utter; but slowly his soul swelled with a storm of grief and rage.

Then from his knees he raised his eyes to the face of the Firefly.

Flash was smiling derisively.

"Well," she said, "now to get square with me! How do you propose to do it?"

"By unavailing your monstrous perfidy! By telling the truth, the whole truth—"

"Undoubtedly," interrupted the Firefly. "But think what an elastic thing the truth is! Since the world began, it has always accommodated itself to the wishes of the teller!"

Jim turned away from her without reply.

He divined the tactics she had adopted. It was to be an issue of personal veracity.

With Happy Harry dead, there was no one to corroborate the statements of either. Sam would have to judge between their several motives—self-protection on the part of the Firefly, revenge on the part of the Jim Dandy.

How, then, did he incline? To which would he lend a partial ear? Love and jealousy, which was most potent in his breast?

Jim found it impossible to read his countenance. It had become as impassive as stone.

Covertly watching him, the Firefly too was baffled.

"I know the disadvantages under which I labor," began Jim. "If I say that she has been deceiving you from the first, she has but to reply that I am practicing upon your jealousy, to secure revenge for the injury she has done me and mine; and it is but the word of one against the word of the other. I trust, then, to the consistency of my story with what you otherwise know, to win your credence."

"You go ahead," answered Sam. "Everybody has a show with me."

This was non-committal.

"The first time I ever saw her," pursued Jim, "Happy Harry lay wounded on the faro-table in Pretty Pete's dance-house—wounded by Pretty Pete and his gang in a treacherous assault on him at her bidding."

"It appears, then," interrupted the Firefly, "that I had a curious way of showing my love by employing some one to kill my lover!"

"I state only the facts," said Jim. "Interpret them when you have them all."

"Happy Harry lay on the faro-table. The room was otherwise deserted, Pete and his gang being about to set out with others in search of the waylayers, his purpose being to thus avert suspicion from himself."

"I looked through the window, and saw this woman enter the room."

"She was almost beside herself with agitation. You know her. You know, without my telling you, what it was like."

Sam Bropey's face grew a shade paler, but his eyes did not waver. Not a muscle in his face showed how he was being affected.

"She was distracted with passion and remorse. In a moment of pique she had set Pretty Pete upon the man who had scorned her, to take his life, and now that the attempt had been made, she had come to cast herself at his feet, and beg him to take her."

"You know whether she is capable of such acts."

Sam did know that she was quite capable of them.

"He only laughed at her!" cried Jim, flashing a look of triumph at the Firefly.

"And now I laugh at him—so we are even!" exclaimed the Firefly.

And she laughed a silvery ripple, only with a little jar of savage bitterness in it.

"She has told you what she thinks I am," pursued Jim. "Let us say that she is in love with Harry, and that, as I have told you, he scorned her. Do not you suppose she would be jealous of me? Would she try to get possession of me with a view to torture? Would she want to torture him too, to kill him rather than yield him to a rival? Which is the more probable—this, or the reason she gave you for her hatred?"

Sam sat picking his teeth with a sliver of

Of course this outward indifference was affected, but it masked his feelings completely.

"How you captured him you yourself know—I do not," pursued Jim. "But I know this—as you nearly killed him in the taking, it is probable that a woman of her nature could not wholly dissemble her feelings. I ask you, was there no outburst on her part which might be prompted by love for him, and hatred of you for the injury you had done him?"

This was a telling stroke.

"Look at her! look at her!" shouted Jim, suddenly pointing an accusing finger at the Firefly, who had been startled out of her carelessness. "I have driven the blood from her cheek! I know that my surmise is true! What did she do? What did she say when Harry lay senseless under your blows?"

Sam did not look at the Firefly to corroborate this accusation, nor did the Firefly look at him to see how he was affected by it.

But she burst again into a derisive laugh.

"I had to be painfully frank with this fellow, and call him a fool, as I may have to again," she answered, for him. "Would you believe it, he had your penetration, and discovered my love for Happy Harry? As for what I did, I had the supreme pleasure of spitting upon the man I loved so desperately."

Jim held his breath while he gazed at the Firefly. Then he turned to Sam.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Did she spit upon him?"

"Yes," replied Sam.

"Well," cried the Jim Dandy, his whole soul glowing with indignation, "I would not have done it, even to save my life! You have proved yourself utterly unscrupulous where you were indifferent. That is bad enough. But in your love you have shown yourself infamous!"

So stinging was this denunciation, that the Firefly sprang from her careless attitude, livid with rage.

"Will you sit by, and let her kill me?" asked Jim. "You see I am defenseless against her."

"She ain't likely to kill you," answered Sam, not moving a muscle.

The event proved that he understood the Firefly in some things at least.

With another of her laughs, she desisted, and sat down again.

"Go on! go on!" she said. "Between your talent for fiction and your genius at guessing, you are making out quite a case. Let us hear the end of it."

Jim concluded by giving a circumstantial account of what had happened in Sam's absence, all of which has recently been detailed.

"That," he said, "is my case. Let her make her defense, and then judge between us."

By way of inviting the Firefly to her defense, Sam repeated what he had said before:

"Everybody has a show with me!"

"But I desire none," answered the Firefly. "Let my actions speak. Whether or not I tried to get Pretty Pete to kill him, you certainly can not think that I expected him ever to leave this house alive. Finally, there he is. Who killed him? Actions speak louder than words. That bit of wisdom is older than the hills. I didn't invent it."

And she smiled as if the whole thing were a rather good joke.

"So that's all?" asked Sam.

"I'm done," replied the Firefly.

For some time Sam had been regarding the prostrate Harry intently.

He now rose, without any particular haste, and kneeling beside him, proceeded to examine him, as if for signs of life.

"What is it?" cried the Jim Dandy, breathlessly.

"He ain't done yet."

"Alive! alive!"

"Keep off, ef you please!"

And Jim being about to cast himself upon the body of his pard, Sam brushed him back.

"You stand off hyar."

"But something must be done to revive him, if this wretch has not indeed killed him!"

"I'll do what revivin' is done. You hark to what I say. I hain't told ye yet whether I believe ye."

"But Harry can confirm my words!"

"It won't be necessary. The thing looks to me like this hyar. Let us say what you have been tellin' me is as good as Gospel, an' the Firefly hyar has been gullin' me from the word go; that it wasn't Purty Pete as she cottoned to, but this hyar snoozer. Waal, then, I reckon he's the chap I want to hang up to dry."

"But he is innocent! He has rebuffed her from the first!"

"What in Cain difference does it make to me

what he thinks o' her? The question before the court is, what does she think o' him?"

The Firefly went off in another of her ripples of laughter.

"So this is the fruit of your ingenuity?" she cried. "Well, I ought to be obliged to you for helping me out. But one good turn deserves another. As you have succeeded in getting your lover's neck in a noose to oblige me, I will do what I can to get it out again to oblige you."

Then turning to Sam, with her eyes twinkling with amusement, she went on:

"You said that I should have a show too. What do you say to giving it to me by supposing—only for the sake of argument, of course—that I have told the truth, and that I do not love him?"

"Waal, that's fair too," admitted Sam, in the same dull way.

"Of course it is!" laughed the Firefly, rubbing her hands in apparent glee. "Now then!"

"Ef you hain't no notion fur him," said Sam, slowly, "so much the better. I'll finish him off to accommoda'e you."

"Ha! ha! ha! So he swings in either case?"

"Sartain!"

"Ah!" ejaculated the Jim Dandy.

It was not a cry of protest, but of amazement and dismay.

The Firefly had fired a shot at Sam Bropey!

It was done like the stroke of a cat's paw. In a flash her face was transformed from the gayest merriment to fiendish malignity.

Sam clutched at his breast as if to tear out a scorpion that had stung him, and stood for an instant with mouth agape and suspended breath.

Then, with a howl of fury, he cleared the space between him and the Firefly at a single bound, and bore her to the floor so that her second shot went wild.

The Jim Dandy stood spellbound.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST HOPE GONE.

It seemed as if the infuriate man would annihilate the woman with his bare hands.

Instead, he disarmed her, and then arose, apparently as calm as before his outburst.

It was all done so quickly that the Jim Dandy had no time to interfere, or to do anything looking to the subsequent protection of himself and his pard.

Though not otherwise injured, the breath was knocked out of the Firefly by her fall, and by the terrible violence of the assault.

When she recovered, however, her old bantering humor was gone.

She had played her game and lost. Now the real woman came to the surface.

"You have won," she said to Jim Dandy, "but it were better for you to have lost!"

Then she turned to Sam Bropey.

"Now listen to me," she demanded. "What you have heard is nothing! I will tell you the truth from the ground up!"

"When I first saw you, I was the greatest fool in all Montana—or out of it, for that matter! I listened to you, because you had just made what appeared to be a great strike, and you promised that I should see the world. You know how that went up in smoke! But I'll tell you what you don't know, and what I never favored you with before.

"At that time one man was the same as another to me. You would serve as well as another, if you give me what I wanted—life! I thought you would do better than most, you was such a soft fool! I promised myself that, once out in the world, my nose-of-wax wouldn't be particularly in my way.

"Well, I hadn't cared for you; but when I found that you had fooled me, I hated you with a venom that words are hard to express!

"Pretty Pete was my next venture. I need say but little of him. He was such a fiend of ugliness, but such a turkey-cock for vanity, that I knew I could manage him with little inconvenience to myself. With wealth at his command, I knew he would be only too glad of the privilege of parading me before the world as his wife. I making my own terms in private.

"Well, it was then I met the man lying here. Of him I will say only this—from the first I loved him as I love him now!"

Her face was transfigured as she looked down at Harry. No words could have conveyed an impression equal to that look.

Sam Bropey's face was already livid. Now only his bloodshot eyes followed every fleeting expression of her face.

"All this," she went on, "has been a desperate game to win him. In moments when I felt

the utter powerlessness of anything in me to move him, I have hated him with an intensity compared with which my bitterest hatred of you was affection. In other moments—and the look of beatific adoration returned to her face—"I have loved him so that I would not have exchanged the sound of his voice, even gibing at me, for a breath in Heaven!"

"But this is the end! Suppose you hang us together?"

"That's jest my notion," said Bropey, quietly.

"It will be your last and greatest favor," answered the Firefly. "I shall be grateful to you for that, as I never was for anything else you ever did for me."

"I reckon that's so," responded Sam, carefully picking a hangnail from his finger.

With a sudden cry of blended love and despair, the Firefly cast herself upon the body of Happy Harry, who was now breathing perceptibly, though still unconscious.

Against this the Jim Dandy protested with all the energy of his nature.

"What! Such sacrilege as this?" he cried.

And instantly he pounced upon the Firefly, dragging her away.

There might have been a struggle between the two, but Sam prevented it.

Taking the Firefly aside, he set her down on the bunk.

"You stay thar tell I'm ready fur ye," he directed.

Next, taking the rope with which he had lowered and elevated Jim Dandy in the shaft, he threw a bight of it over a hook driven in a rafter directly over the trap.

With the shorter end of this he deliberately proceeded to tie a hangman's noose.

His evident purpose struck dismay to Jim Dandy's heart.

"Oh!" he cried, "what are you about to do?"

"I'm 'lowin' to hang this hyar chap up to dry," answered Sam, unmoved.

"You cannot be so cruel! Think! he has done nothing to you. He has—"

"Knocked all my calculations higher'n Gilderoy's kite."

"One moment! He will not interfere with you. He will go away. It will be the same to you as if he were dead."

"Not much! While thar's life thar's hope. As long as he's kickin', th Firefly'll be hankerin' after him. This hyar won't hurt him none. He's past feelin' it."

"But you shall not!" cried the Jim Dandy, seizing his hands in desperation.

"Cheese it!" growled Bropey. "You ain't big enough fur to fool around me."

"While I have the strength to oppose you—" "Drop it! The thing's played, I tell ye!"

"You may kill me; but you cannot induce me to submit quietly to this atrocity—"

"I see I'll have to tie you up."

With scarcely any exertion of his great strength Sam pulled away the clinging hands of the Dandy, and held them, crossed at the wrist, in his single powerful grip.

Then the Dandy's wits came to the rescue. To be tied, was to be rendered helpless to take advantage of any chance that might offer.

"No! no!" he pleaded. "Don't leave me in the power of that vicious woman. Kill me yourself, if you are determined to; but spare me the humiliation of being a helpless victim of her malice."

If Bropey saw through this subterfuge, he had too much confidence in himself to care about it. Indeed, his pride spurned caution, as a mark of weakness.

"Hands off, that's all I ask," he said, pushing Jim away from him, and proceeding with his preparations.

Taking the one precaution to stand so that neither the Firefly nor Jim could get at the weapons at his back, he began to whistle softly to himself as an accompaniment to his work.

It was heart-rending to stand helplessly by and watch him deliberately measure the suitable length of the bight in the rope, and then coil the spiral which was to allow it to slip easily.

This he adjusted to Happy Harry's neck as he lay, and then went to the other end, to draw the unresisting body up off the floor, till it swung free over the open trap.

The Firefly could not watch this unmoved. She quivered in every nerve.

"I thought you was going to hang us together," she interposed.

"Don't you worry. Thar'll be room fur you when he's danglin'. But I'm 'lowin' fur to give you the benefit o' your work before you git your send-off. It's your last comfort in this hyar world."

"It'll work both ways. If you was lyin' to me when you said you *was* in love with him, then you'll git the revenge what you've *worked* fur. If you was lyin' to me when you said you *wasn't* in love with him, then you'll git the revenge what you *spoke* fur."

The Firefly replied with a hysterical laugh.

But Jim Dandy could not endure his anguish in silence.

"Oh, for God's sake!" he cried, falling upon his knees.

Sam Bropey was invulnerable to this appeal. He did not even look toward the suppliant, but deliberately hauled on the rope till Happy Harry's body swung back and forth over the mouth of the shaft.

This he secured in place by taking a double turn round a cleat provided for that purpose.

Meanwhile Jim Dandy had got upon his feet, to stare at the dangling body in breathless fascination.

If anything was to be done, it must be done instantly.

Ah! why had he delayed, when by some lucky chance he might have succeeded in throwing the murderer down the trap, even if he had had to fall with him?

But now it was too late. Even if he overcame Sam, Harry would still be left hanging.

He had waited from instant to instant for some opening that promised successful resistance, and none had presented itself.

At this moment, when he was ready to throw up his hands and fall insensible in his helpless despair, or to fly at the murderer and seek to wreak vengeance upon him irrespective of any benefit to his pard; while Bropey still bent over the cleat; while the Firefly was laughing between hysteria and insanity, the anguish of love distorting her face; the door was suddenly thrown open, and a gruff voice exclaimed in greeting:

"Hullo, gents! Thar's music in the air! What's the reason we all shouldn't have a show?"

And no less a person than Pretty Pete leaped into the middle of the room.

Never was there a more hideous-looking villain than this.

His hair and beard were matted with neglect. A bloody bandage was bound about his head. His clothes were torn, and foul with dirt, and black and stiff where blood from his wounds had dried in the cloth.

The scar to whose disfigurement he owed his sobriquet—a knife-thrust which had destroyed the bridge of the nose—made a livid diagonal across his face.

His bloodshot eyes were wolfish in their ferocity.

"Petel Petel!" cried the Firefly, springing up at sight of him, "kill that devil for me, and ask anything in return!"

He only regarded her with a fiendish grin of unutterable hatred, and then turned to meet Sam.

He had not an instant to spare.

The two revolvers exploded at the same instant; and then the men came together with a crash.

To such hatred as these rivals entertained for each other, mere death was no satisfaction. They must inflict it with their hands. Each, with the ferocity of a wild beast, longed to tear the other to pieces.

As they clinched, their revolvers were dropped unheeded.

Ah! this was the chance at last for which the Jim Dandy had waited so long in vain.

With an inarticulate cry of eagerness, he pounced upon one of the revolvers; but the Firefly, quite as alert as he, had swooped down upon the other.

Jim had one instant the advantage in distance, and so got "the drop;" but a glance showed him the dismaying fact that the cartridge under the hammer of his pistol had been exploded!

He realized that the weapon had been fired clear round, and was now worthless save as a menace.

He was quick to avail himself of all that it afforded him.

"Move a finger, an eyelash, and I will put a bullet through your heart!" he cried.

Of course the Firefly could not know that he was powerless to make good his words. In Pretty Pete's dance-house he had proved himself a dead shot; and she believed that only his reluctance to taking life preserved her from instant destruction.

But now Jim was in a dilemma. Save as a muzzle for the Firefly, his weapon did him no good.

The thing to do, were he free, was to close the trap, and then let Harry down upon it.

But to untie the rope and let him down would require the use of both hands; and this was impossible, with the Firefly waiting to take advantage of even a momentary turning away of his eyes, to turn the tables upon him, and secure in her turn the fatal "drop."

That once acquired, she would make a merciful use of it, he did not for an instant doubt.

It remained, then, to disarm her.

"I would rather not kill you," he said. "Drop that weapon! I have not long to wait! Drop it!"

"Never!" she replied. "You can triumph over me in death, but no other way. Take your shot; put it where it will do the most good, or look out for yourself!"

He saw that this was her ultimatum. The woman was so desperate that she would accept death before humiliating submission.

Of course that left him helpless against her.

Meanwhile Happy Harry was strangling to death, if indeed he had not already succumbed to his injuries.

If his partner could get possession of another revolver from the writhing combatants, he might go to his aid, but only after having killed or disabled the Firefly, and probably both the men.

Failing in this, there would be but one desperate recourse left—to secure a knife, if possible, and sever the rope, to let his pard drop to possible death down the shaft!

But even this poor chance was snatched from him.

Round and round, back and forth, reeled the combatants, locked in that death-grip.

Now they rapidly neared the open trap; now hovered on the brink, each striving to hurl his enemy to death without sharing his fate; now, with blending yells of rage and horror, plunged headlong down into the darkness, striking against the suspended body, and setting it to swinging violently back and forth over the fatal abyss.

Jim Dandy stood aghast. The horror of the double tragedy apart, his last chance was gone.

It never occurred to him to appeal to the ferocious woman who held him helpless. He knew that she would sacrifice Harry rather than yield him to another.

"Now," he cried, falling upon his knees in despair, "God help me!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST ACT.

As all nice girls are sure to have sooner or later, if they give the fellows half a show, pretty Kitty Macmillan had an adorer.

Of course it was Gid Becket. Hadn't she, many a time and oft, declared that there wasn't another man within a thousand miles of Hicks's Hurrah that she would waste a single glance upon?

Now Gid was a model lover. He always did as he was told, as all lovers should. And—well, if the truth must out—Kitty led him a dance, as the saying is.

When darkness came without bringing the return of the Jim Dandy or Happy Harry, Miss Kitty cut short every would-be manifestation of affection with which Gid approached her, and commanded him never to let her see him again till he brought back the missing ones.

She had nothing to suggest as to how he was to find them; the thing was to find them!

Gid, feeling that the course of true love never did run smooth, went out into the wide world, with only the direction due west to guide him.

His wandering was of the most aimless sort. The only thing was, not to give up till he was successful.

It shows what a faithful fellow he was, and how richly he deserved the reward he afterward got, that he persisted against all reasonable probability till after midnight, and would have done so till daylight, for that matter, instead of playing "roots" on his exacting lady love, and bestowing himself comfortably where he could discover the wanderers' return, if indeed they did return.

So it came about that he was startled by a shot, and afterward, guided by the groaning, came upon Doc Fleetwood creeping upon hands and knees down the gulch, that being his only guide on his return to Hicks's Hurrah and human aid.

Shot through the left lung, the surgeon had

yet strength and nerve enough to make his way slowly and with infinite pain.

But he was glad to desist and lie by while Gid ran for assistance.

It was while the camp was being roused with this intelligence, that the bloody cartridge-belt and bowie were discovered; and the rumors that then flew wild got rather mixed, as rumors are apt to do.

It was only an inference that the Jim Dandy was dead and Happy Harry cut to pieces. The rest—that Doc Fleetwood had found them, and Gid Becket brought the news—was easily confounded.

It will be remembered that the news reached even Hicks, and that he got out of his sick bed to see for himself.

He looked startlingly like a dead man; but the fires of excitement blazed in his sunken eyes, and the strength of a dozen men seemed bound up in his shrunken limbs.

When he had gazed at the belt and bowie, he demanded to hear Gid Becket's account of Doc Fleetwood's misadventure.

This led to the detailing of how the surgeon happened to be in the shanty from which he was abducted.

"That's enough!" cried Hicks, suddenly. "Fetch me a hoss! How many is at my back? I'm goin' to lead you whar thar's blood to be spilt!"

Of course, they were all at his back, or as many as could get mounts.

So it was that, under his guidance, a war-party swept out of the camp.

Like black ghouls they rode through the darkness, never drawing rein till they neared Sam Bropey's "fort."

Hicks had reasoned correctly. He knew of the Firefly's past, and of her relations with Sam Bropey. Sam's agency in getting the surgeon where he could be abducted gave him the clew he wanted.

Dismounting, they had better luck than they expected, passing the narrow entrance to the stronghold without opposition.

So it happened that they surprised the "fort."

The sounds of conflict going on within the hut led to the supposition that Happy Harry was struggling with his captor.

Mad with rage, Hicks leaped forward, and burst open the door.

The words of appeal had scarcely died on the Jim Dandy's lips when this unexpected response came.

He turned his head, and so released the Firefly from the menace of his revolver.

Her glance went to the door. She recognized Hicks and the men at his back. The Jim Dandy no longer held the magical "drop" on her.

Like a flash she fired, but at the swaying body of Happy Harry.

Then, with a wild laugh, she put her weapon to her own head, and pulled the fatal trigger.

She would have delayed to fire at the Jim Dandy, but she saw that she had not time. Hicks was upon her like a tornado, and would effect her capture if she did not elude him in the only way possible, by her own hand.

So she passed from all chance of further setting men at enmity with each other; and down in that black pit were found two mortal enemies locked in a last deadly embrace.

But who ever had such a nurse as did Happy Harry? Everybody declared that Jim Dandy, so handy with the weapons most distinctive of manhood, could yet beat, in her own field, "ary woman-crittur what ever stood in shoe-leather!"

Gid Becket was the most complacent fellow you ever saw; and from that day Kitty was the most submissive sweetheart that any man ever had, declaring that he had earned the right to freedom from teasing henceforth.

But what do you think? It certainly wasn't six months later, when Happy Harry was married to a young lady in 'Frisco, to whom he had been presented as the Jim Dandy's twin sister, Jim himself being a way from home.

But when the knot was securely tied, Harry got his wife in a corner and said:

"Now, Jim, come down!"

"You knew it all along?" she cried, her face ablaze.

"Of course I did," he answered.

"Shame upon you, then! you're a deceiver!"

"But you, Jim? How about you?"

"I don't care! And I just hate you!"

But Harry is well content with her peculiar way of manifesting that emotion, and still insists that she is a Jim Dandy.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.